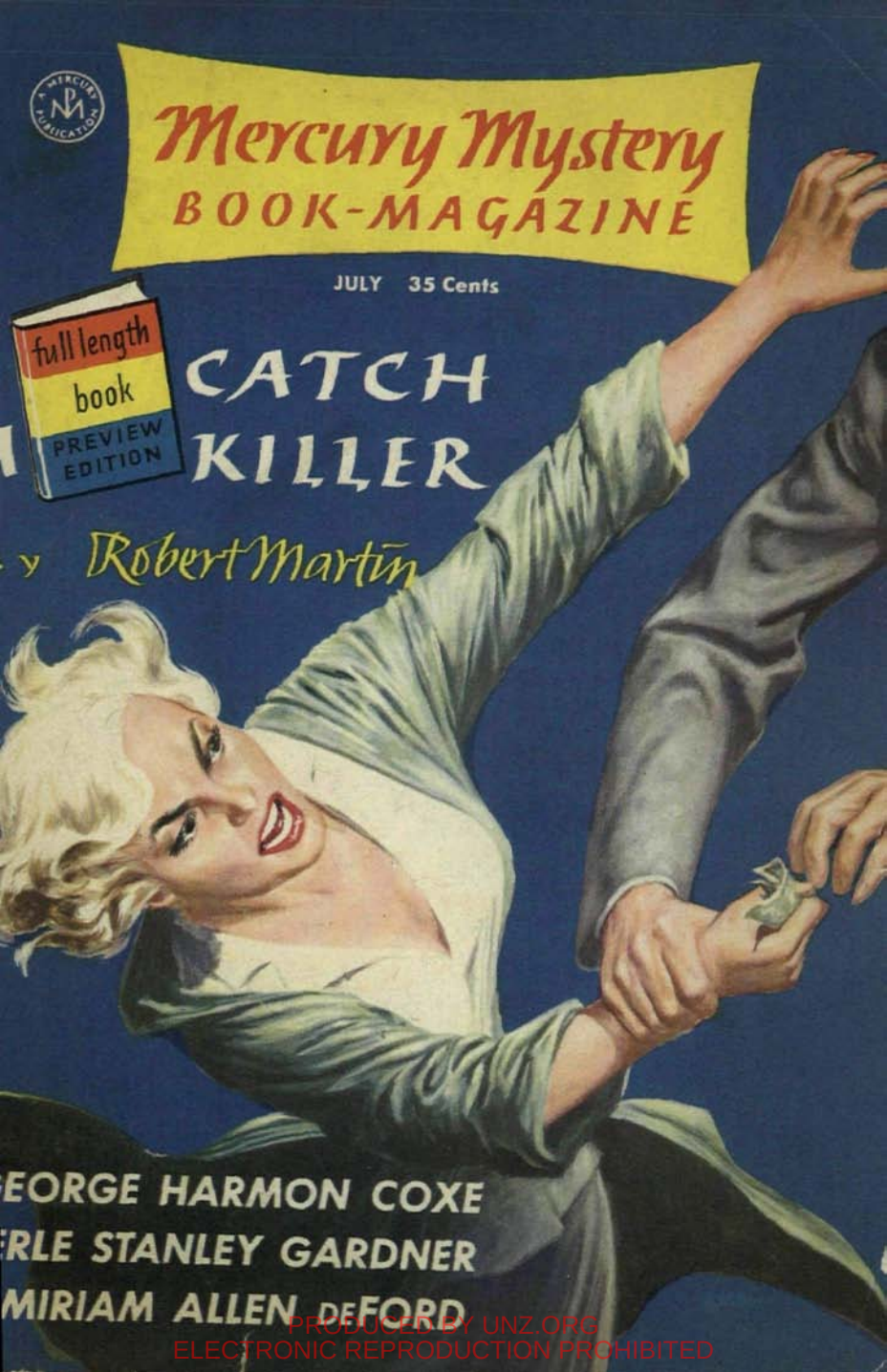

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Mercury Mystery
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CATCH A KILLER — *Robert Martin* 3

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Robert Martin is the personnel manager for a large Cleveland firm. He has also found time to successfully write and sell twelve books and over one hundred short stories and novelettes which have been translated into three languages and heavily reprinted. He defines the good life as: wife, three children and Calico Cat named Pepper; hobbies — golf, guns and criminology; tastes — Martinis, bourbon and hamburgers.

In this suspenseful, pre-hardcover-publication novel, detective Jim Bennett is instructed to find beautiful and wayward Francine Hopkins who won't come home to Mother — not even for big money. Francine says she wants to marry band leader Johnny Wingate and Jim Bennett's job suddenly grows much tougher when Wingate is brutally murdered and Francine becomes chief suspect.

CATCH A KILLER

by ROBERT MARTIN

CHAPTER ONE

IT WAS ONE OF THE FEW old mansions on East Euclid which had not been converted into an apartment house or rest home or torn down to make way for a super service station. I parked my car beneath a pillared portico, went up sandstone steps to a long screened porch and pressed a bell button. It was three o'clock on a hot afternoon in August.

A woman wearing a white nurse's uniform came out on the porch and peered at me through the screen. She was thirtyish, rather pretty, in spite of a slight plumpness and no make-up. Brown hair tinted with gray curled damply beneath the white starched cap. "Yes?" she said pleasantly.

"My name is Bennett," I said. "I have an appointment with Mrs. Hopkins."

"Oh, yes." She unlatched the screen door, opened it and stood aside. "Please come in."

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As I stepped to the porch I caught the faint starched antiseptic smell of her. "This way. Mrs. Hopkins is in the sun room."

I followed her down a dusky hall into a dim room. The windows were closed and the heat was stifling.

A woman sat in a deep low chair in direct sunlight. She had a thin white face, intense dark eyes and white hair curled professionally and absurdly into tight little ringlets. The small thin mouth was brightly lipsticked, and the sunken rouged cheeks contrasted shockingly with the dry, pale, powdered skin. In the long ago past she might have been beautiful.

The plump nurse spoke, and she was almost panting in the heat of the room. "Mrs. Hopkins, here is Mr. Bennett."

"Thank you, dear." The woman's voice was surprisingly strong and rich.

The nurse left quickly, glad to get out of this stifling room, I guessed.

"Please sit down," Mrs. Hopkins said to me. I sat on a straight chair.

She said briskly, "I won't detain you longer than necessary. I know you are uncomfortable here, as is Miss Stanton, but I can't help it — something about my metabolism and circulation. It seems that I am always cold, perhaps because I will soon be a corpse."

I was a little startled, but managed a smile. "I wouldn't say that."

"But I do, and I don't mind. My doctor tells me quite frankly that I have perhaps six months to live, a year at the most. My poor old heart is worn out. I am ready to die, but there is something I want first. That is why I asked you to come here."

I gazed at her politely and enquiringly. I had no idea why Mrs. Hopkins wanted to see me. My secretary, Sandy Hollis, had taken the call. A little checking had revealed that Mrs. Lavina Hopkins was the widow of Christopher Hopkins, known on the Great Lakes during the middle thirties as Captain Chris, owner of the biggest fleet of ore barges plying between Duluth and Buffalo. The Hopkins mansion on Cleveland's Euclid Avenue still represented money, much money.

Smiling rather archly, Mrs. Hopkins said, "Mr. Bennett, I don't mind telling you that I had my attorney investigate your agency. He reported that it was entirely reliable. I want you to find my daughter and persuade her to come home, to be with me during my last days on earth. It is not too much for a mother to ask. She is my only child. She's had everything . . ."

Her tired old voice droned on and on. I listened carefully, trying to ignore the oppressive heat. I learned that the daughter, who bore the rather Frenchy first name of Francine and the Nordic middle name of Christina, had skipped town, at the delinquent age of sixteen, with a roving trumpet player from a Grade B dance band working the lake resort beach spots. By the time the police had located her, the trumper player had traveled on and Francine

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was working in a frosted malt drive-in outside Bay City, Michigan. The cops brought her home, but they never did catch the trumpet player.

Mrs. Hopkins didn't exactly say so, but I gathered that after Francine came home things did not go too smoothly and that relations between mother and daughter had been more than a little strained. And so, a year later, when Francine was almost eighteen, she skipped again. This time mamma did not try to bring her back. Six months went by, and then Mrs. Hopkins heard from her daughter — Francine Christina wanted to come home. But by that time mamma had developed a bitter she-made-her-bed attitude; she did not answer Francine's letter, nor the two that followed. And then came the heart attack, and when Mrs. Hopkins came out of the oxygen tent she decided, after all, that she wanted to see her baby girl before she died, in spite of the path of sin Francine had so willfully followed. She had changed her will, she said, and had left all of her estate to Francine — provided that Francine would come home and sit by her bedside to comfort her in her last days. But by then Francine had changed, too; she didn't want to come home, not ever, for any reason.

It all boiled down to this: Mrs. Hopkins wanted to hire me to bring Francine Christina home. She had no close relatives, no one she could turn to, except her attorneys, and they had failed. There was no one else to send. I was her last hope. Would I do it?

I sighed, and said carefully, "Where is your daughter?"

"The last letter was from Columbus. I'll give you the address."

"She may have moved. How long ago did your lawyers see her?"

"It was in June."

"Is she working?"

"I suppose so — she must be. I instructed the lawyers to give her some money, but she refused to accept it. I sent her a check then, but she returned it." Mrs. Hopkins sighed, and her thin lips quivered. "Francine is like her father — independent, and stubborn, and . . ." She closed her eyes and a tear rolled down one cheek, caking the layer of powder. "Please bring her home, Mr. Bennett. Bring my baby home to me."

I made up my mind. "I'll try. What's the last address you have?"

She reached a thin bony hand under the pink blanket, brought out a folded piece of paper. I unfolded it, saw shaky handwriting in blue ink: *Francine Christina Hopkins, 1467 Puxatawney Street, Columbus, Ohio.*

"Thank you," I said pocketing the paper. I hesitated, and then said, "This may not mean anything, but it might help if I knew the name of the — the man she went away with two years ago."

Something ugly glittered in her eyes, and the small muscles around her thin mouth grew taut. "Johnny Wingate," she said. "Seducer."

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I was startled. The name of Johnny Wingate was a famous one in popular music circles. A year ago Johnny Wingate, His Band and His Trumpet, were unknown, but now there was not a juke box in the country which did not offer at least several Wingate selections. No matter what Johnny Wingate's morals were, he had climbed to the near summit in a tough profession.

"He's a celebrity now," I told Mrs. Hopkins.

"So I understand," she said in a brittle voice. "Bring back my daughter, Mr. Bennett, and I'll give you five hundred dollars, above your regular fee. If you require an advance payment. . . ."

"That is not necessary. My office will send you a statement of our fee and an itemized expense report."

She closed her eyes and whispered, "Please bring her back to me."

I left her.

CHAPTER TWO

IT WAS ALMOST FIVE O'CLOCK when I reached my office, Sandy Hollis was closing up shop and had the outgoing mail stacked in a neat bundle on her desk. Sandy is a tall, long-legged, brown-haired girl with a few freckles over her short nose. She has friendly brown eyes and a soft mouth that doesn't look natural unless she is smiling. Today she wore a simple black linen dress with short sleeves and it looked very well on her rangy body. She had been with me since I'd taken over the agency's Cleveland office.

"Hi, Jim," she greeted me. "I didn't think you'd be back and I signed your letters for you."

"Good." I tossed my hat to the desk. "Everything under control?"

"Pretty well," she said. "Alec called in from Detroit. He's got a hot lead on that missing insurance beneficiary and is working on it. Red Drake just left. He found Mr. Strickland's feeble-minded son in a bar on Carnegie. Slobbering drunk, Red said. He got him home to papa, but that poor kid shouldn't be allowed to run around loose — I don't care how proud Mr. Strickland is, or how rich. Red said there was a little trouble, but he got the kid away all right." She sighed and shook her head. "People."

Alec Hammond was my one full-time assistant. Red Drake was a part-time employee who was very good at tailing and body guard jobs. He had a private income and worked for the agency mostly for the fun of it, but he was dependable and I frequently called him to fill in when Alec and I were tied up. "People and trouble," I said, grinning at Sandy. "How would we

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make a living without people and trouble?"

She grinned back. "We'd have to make an honest living, I suppose."

"All right. How about having dinner with me tonight?"

She shook her head. "I can't. Gotta supervise my girl's swim class at the Y at seven. Martini fumes wouldn't mix with the athletic Y atmosphere."

"I'm going away tomorrow," I told her.

"Again?" she wailed. "Where?"

"Columbus. A couple of days." I told her briefly about Mrs. Hopkins and her wayward daughter. Then I suggested, "How about dinner after your class? Can you wait that long?"

"For dinner — with martinis first? Of course I can!"

"Good." I patted her cheek. "Drink a glass of milk to keep up your strength. I'll be waiting in front of the Y at eight."

"Yes, Boss," she said demurely, gathering up the mail. "Very good, sir."

I spent the next few hours cleaning up odds and ends. Then I checked on Wingate and learned he would be in Columbus the following night. Then I went home. At seven o'clock I shaved, showered and put on clean clothes. By a quarter of eight I'd driven back down town and was loitering by the steps of the Y building where Sandy conducted her swim class. At five after eight she came out tossing her damp brown hair away from her face and attempting to fluff it out with her fingers. "Hi," she greeted me. "I never saw a bathing cap yet that kept the water out. Where are you parked?"

"Down the street." I led her to the car and we drove away. We had dinner on the terrace at my golf club. There was a small breeze off the lake, and it was almost cool. Afterward we sat in the moonlight, had one brandy each, and talked about the agency, about life and love and people, books and movies and television. Sandy was comfortable to be with, and once more I thought that I should ask her to marry me. I'd kept putting it off, because I liked the way things were between us, and if I asked her, and she refused, that would spoil it. There was plenty of time, I told myself, and maybe, like many batchelors, I instinctively shied away from the tie that binds and all that. And Sandy had never made any sign that she was unhappy with our rather odd employer-employee-friend relationship.

At eleven o'clock I left her at her apartment. We kissed in the hall, a half friendly, half lover's kiss, and said good night. The memory of her cool soft lips kept me company all the way across town to my place.

It was hotter in Columbus than it had been in Cleveland. I bucked the traffic on High Street past the Ohio State University campus and all the way down to Broad Street, where I turned right and stopped by the south entrance to the Deshler-Hilton. I told the doorman that I'd be right out as

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soon as I'd registered, and a boy carried my bag into the big cool lobby. As I registered, I was informed by the polite clerk that I had a nice room in the tower. I thanked him, told the boy to take my bag up, tipped the boy, and went back out to the sidewalk. I gave the doorman fifty cents and asked him the location of the dance place known as Rainbow Terrace. It was on the river, he said, and gave me careful instructions.

Rainbow Terrace was on the river road not far from the Ohio State stadium. It was in a wooded section, reached by a paved road from the highway, and occupied approximately four acres of ground. There was a restaurant, an ice cream and malted booth, several novelty concessions, picnic tables in a grove, and a huge low pavilion with a screened porch all around it. Red letters on one white-washed wall proclaimed: *Rainbow Terrace — Swimming, Boating, Refreshments — Dancing Nightly.* Wooden steps led up to a box office beside the main entrance and a sign there read: *Tonight — Johnny Wingate, His Trumpet and His Orchestra — Popular Recording Star — Featuring Sally Valdez, Vocalist. Dancing from 9:00 until 1:00 — $1.50 per person.*

I went up wooden steps, through a wide screen door, crossed the porch and entered an archway opening into a huge ball room. Heavy canvas covered the dance floor, and tables and chairs were piled high at one end. Directly opposite me was a lighted band shell on a raised platform. A piano was there, along with a microphone and fourteen men, twelve of whom held musical instruments. The other two were at the piano and drums. Most of them were without coats or ties, and several were naked from the waist up. A small slender girl wearing tight white shorts and a short-sleeved white blouse stood by the microphone. Her slim legs were sun-browned and her silver-blond hair was tied back severely with a white ribbon. All of them, the men and the girl, were watching a fifteenth man who stood on the dance floor before the platform. He was a small man, slender, with black hair.

"Lousy," I heard him say, his voice echoing under the high curved ceiling. "Putrid. So maybe this is corn country, the sticks? What of it? They buy records here, too. Understand? We gotta give 'em that Wingate touch. It's what they expect for their money. And they deserve it. Sure, I know it's hot. You're all on salary. If anybody wants to quit, just say so."

The fourteen men and the girl stared at him silently.

The huge room was suddenly filled with the soft, rhythmic melody of *Sweet Sue.* The beat was perfect and each note was sharp and clear. The small blond girl's body began to sway to the rhythm as she moved closer to the microphone. She stood there, leaning forward slightly, her face uptilted, hands clasped behind her, look of ecstasy in her eyes. Her voice was surprisingly husky, soft too, with an appealing quality. . . .

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When the song was finished, the man on the floor dropped his arm. In the sudden quiet, the girl said reproachfully, "You didn't play with us, Johnny." She jumped lightly down from the platform and took his arm. He was only a little taller than she. He turned his head, and I saw his face then, a lean dark face with a straight nose and cleft chin.

"You don't need a trumpet with *Sweet Sue*," I heard him say.

The man at the piano called, "Can we knock off now, Johnny?"

"Sure. Everybody on deck at a quarter of nine."

The musicians left the platform and crossed the dance floor. As they passed me, I heard one of them say, "Man, I could sure use a cold beer." He was the piano player, a young-old man with a a clipped red mustache.

Up by the platform the blond girl and the dark man were talking earnestly. I turned and gazed out over the porch. A crowd of kids from the beach had come up and were standing at the foot of the steps gazing at the band members with rapt, adoring eyes.

The piano player and the others moved through the small crowd and climbed into the bus. A youth I recognized as the drummer got behind the wheel. The bus pulled away, but the crowd stayed by the steps, gazing expectantly up at the pavilion. They were waiting for Johnny Wingate, I thought, the main attraction.

I turned, walked across the dance floor to where the orchestra leader and the girl singer were standing. They heard my footsteps, broke off what appeared to be an angry conversation, and turned to gaze at me. The girl sighed impatiently and looked annoyed. She was very pretty, with clear hazel eyes and carefully painted lips, and I saw that her silver blond hair was silver blond clear to the roots. Johnny Wingate gave me a crooked, enquiring smile. He had straight black brows, a thin boyish face with a sensitive mouth. Not weak, but sensitive. His eyes were very black, with heavy lashes, and were not boyish at all. They were old eyes, old and wise, too old and too wise for his age, which I guessed to be about twenty-five.

I said, "Hello, Johnny. My name is Bennett. Could I see you privately for a couple of minutes?"

He hesitated, glanced at the girl a trifle ruefully. "Do you mind, Sally?"

"Certainly I mind, darling," she said, ignoring me. "Who is he?"

He said patiently, "Baby, he said his name was Bennett. I don't know him. Maybe he wants to sign me for the Palace, or the Paladium. Maybe he's a scout for MGM." He paused, smiled gently, and when he spoke again his voice held a cold edge. "Just get the hell out to the car, baby, and wait for me. Okay?"

Quick anger flared in her eyes. She started to speak, changed her mind, and turned quickly and walked away. She made an attractive picture as she moved with a model's grace across the dance floor. Johnny Wingate sighed. "Dames," he said, and turned to me "What can I do for you, Mr. Bennett?"

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"Just answer a couple of questions."

He lifted one eyebrow. "What kind of questions? Are you a reporter?"

I answered the double querry. "Simple questions. I'm not a reporter." I smiled at him. "You make nice music. I caught the last take on *Sweet Sue*."

He grinned, showing white even teeth. "I'm glad it was the last one. They were just horsing around before. Too hot to practice, they said."

I said, "Do you remember Francine Hopkins?"

Something flickered in his eyes, and was gone. Then he frowned, hesitated, and gave me his boyish smile. "Francine Hopkins?" Should I remember her?"

"Yes," I said gently, "you should."

His boyish smile went away and he said distinctly, "I never heard of anyone named Francine Hopkins."

CHAPTER THREE

HE SPOKE SOFTLY. "So you're a cop?"

"No. I'm trying to find her. I thought maybe you could help."

His black brows came together. "Why?"

I shrugged. "Just a hunch. I thought it possible that you and Francine had gotten together again. If you had, it would save me some hunting."

He sighed heavily. "I see, but you're wrong. I haven't seen Francine since — since shortly after we left Cleveland that time. And I didn't ditch her. We quarreled. I guess we both knew that it had been a dumb thing to do — at least, I knew it. I wanted to take her back home, but she wouldn't let me. Said she didn't want to go home. She just left. I never saw her again."

He sighed again, and gazed at me with puzzles eyes. "So little Fran is living here in Columbus? She was a cute kid." He shook his head slowly. "It seems a long time ago. I think I've grown up since then. Anyhow, I hope I have."

"You seem to be doing fine, Johnny," I said. "Thanks for talking to me."

"You're welcome," he said seriously. "If you find her, give her my regards."

"If I find her. The address is two months old."

He took a printed ticket from a pocket of his slacks and handed it to me. "If you get a chance, come out and hear us tonight."

I took the ticket. "Thanks, Johnny."

He lifted a hand. As I opened the screen door to the porch and went out, I looked back. He was still standing before the band shell watching me. He hadn't moved, and he looked oddly alone in the big ball room.

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I walked around the pavilion to the front entrance where I'd left my car. A powder blue Cadillac convertible with New York plates was parked off the drive beneath some maple trees. The singer, Sally Valdez, sat in the front seat smoking a cigarette. She looked at me as I went past, and I nodded politely. She made no response, and it seemed to be that her eyes held a kind of cold contempt.

Puxatawny Street was long and narrow and lined with soot-gray houses, with a factory district at one end and the Olentangy River at the other. The house numbered 1467 was bigger than the others and was well back from the street beyond a neat lawn. The paint was peeling a little and the evergreens needed trimming, but the place held an air of respectability. I had visited Puxatawny Street seven years before on another job, but at the moment I couldn't remember what the job had been. I pressed a bell button and almost immediately a woman appeared behind the screen.

I removed my panama. "Good afternoon. I'm looking for Miss Francine Hopkins. Does she still live here?"

"Yes," the woman said, "but she's not here now."

"Do you expect her back soon?" I asked, thinking that I was in luck. I hadn't really expected to find Francine Hopkins still at the address her mother had given me.

"I really can't tell you," the woman said in her tired voice. "Sometimes she comes home right after work, and sometimes she eats her dinner down town first. It's hard to say when she'll be here."

"Would you mind telling me where she works?"

"At the Greerson Trucking Company — it's way out on High Street, almost to the city limits, south."

"Thank you, Mrs . . .?"

"Carewe," she said, and sighed. "I suppose you're another lawyer sent by her mother?"

"No, ma'am. Thank you for the information." I glanced at my wrist watch. Four-thirty. "I suppose she works until five?"

"Five or five-thirty. It depends upon whether Mr. Greerson keeps her late."

"In case I miss her, I may be back."

"All right," she said tiredly.

"Thank you." I put on my hat and left her. As I drove back toward High Street, I decided that Mrs. Carewe was a widow. She had that look.

It was five o'clock when I reached the Greerson Trucking Company. It was a long low brick and glass building in the middle of a two-acre black-topped area filled with parked tractor and trailer outfits, all bearing huge yellow letters reading *GREERSON, Columbus, Ohio.* The whole place had a new modern appearance. I parked my car and went in.

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In contrast to the heat outside, the air-conditioning almost made me shiver. A little red-headed girl sat at a small switchboard behind a gray steel typist's desk. Her face was freckled and she wore blue tinted Harlequin-shaped frames which almost exactly matched her eyes. She stopped typing and gazed at me enquiringly.

I removed my hat. "Would it be possible to speak with Miss Francine Hopkins?"

She hesitated, and a tiny frown appeared between her sand-colored brows. Then she said, "Mr. Greerson would have to okay it. Miss Hopkins is his secretary."

"Would you please ask Mr. Greerson? It will only take a few minutes."

She glanced at a tiny gold wrist watch. "It's quitting time, but we're working late to get out some bills of lading for a big shipment south tonight." She sighed, and added, "But I'll ask him." She swung around, took the phone from its hook on the board and spoke softly. "Mr. Greerson, there's a gentleman here who would like to speak to Miss Hopkins. He says it will only take a few minutes."

There was the brief drone of an answering voice. The redhead said, "Yes, sir," hung up and turned to me. "You may go in. Mr. Greerson's office is the first one on your right." She nodded at a frosted glass door.

I thanked her, went through the door and found myself in a corridor paneled with knotty pine. There were three doors on my right. The first one was open. I entered a small cluttered office.

A tall lean man with gray eyes, sharp cheekbones and bristly black hair stood behind a green metal desk littered with papers, pencils, an overflowing ash tray, an open package of cigarettes, several crumpled paper cups. Beside the ash tray was a moisture-headed ginger ale bottle, half full, and an open brown whisky bottle with a bourbon label. The man was about thirty-five, maybe a little older. He wore gray flannel slacks and a soft white shirt open at the neck. The untied ends of a blue speckled bow tie hung loosely from the collar. From an adjoining office there came the busy clatter of a typewriter. It was cool here, too, and there was the smell of whisky and cigarette smoke mingled with faint odor of oil and gasoline. On the wall behind the desk was a blown-up framed photograph of a grinning young man leaning out of the cab of a tractor-trailer outfit. I recognized him as the man before me, younger and fatter. Lettering on the cab read *Greerson, Columbus, Ohio — No. 1.*

The man eyes me silently. I said, "Mr. Greerson?"

He nodded silently.

"My name's Bennett." Then I took out my wallet and showed him my license card, thinking that maybe it would be just as well to get things out in the open.

He peered at the card for a long moment. Then he sighed. "So she's trying everything, huh? First the lawyers, and now a private dick." He

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squinted at me. "An honest-to-God private eye. Haven't I heard of you?"

"Maybe," I said. "If I could see Miss Hopkins . . ."

"Sure, sure." He turned toward the open adjoining door and called, "Fran — man here to see you," and swung back to face me. "Go on in." He leaned forward and spoke in a low voice, "But it won't do you any good, believe me."

"Maybe not," I murmured, "but I'm getting paid to try." I moved past his desk, aware that the sound of typing had stopped, and entered the adjoining office.

A medium-sized girl turned away from a typewriter and gazed at me soberly. She had shoulder-length black hair, parted on the side and combed straight across her forehead. Her face was rather narrow, but her mouth was full and very red. Large eyes beneath smooth black brows were the amber color of good tobacco. She was not quite pretty, but her face held a somber appealing quality. She wore a simple sleeveless pink summer dress which exposed delicate shoulders and thin white arms. Frail was the word for Francine Christina Hopkins, and I was little surprised at her appearance. Maybe I'd expected a brassy babe with bleached hair.

"Miss Hopkins?"

"Yes." Her voice was low and soft.

"My name is Bennett. Could I talk with you a little — when you've finished work?"

"What about?" Her grave eyes watched me carefully.

"I think you know," I said. "Your mother —"

"No," she broke in sharply. "Please go away."

"She's dying," I said gently. "She wants you to come home. She —"

"No," she said again. "I — I don't want to talk about it." Tears glinted on her dark lashes and her mouth trembled a little.

"I know how you feel," I said. "You went back to her once, and it didn't work out. She's changed now. I wish you'd think it over. It would be greatly to your advantage, and she needs you."

"I needed her once, too," she said bitterly. "I needed her very badly, but she — she . . ." She lowered her head and I saw the clean white part in her glossy black hair. I waited a moment, and then I said to the girl, "I'll see you later."

She didn't move or speak. I returned to the outer office.

Greerson was replacing the phone in its cradle. He grinned up at me. "No luck, huh?"

I shook my head.

"Good. I'd hate to lose her. Fran's the best little secretary I ever had. Knows the business better than I do."

A tall heavy kid entered the office carrying a mail pouch. I say "kid," but it was difficult to tell his age. He had a soft white face, a long nose and a

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loose mouth. Muddy colored hair was slicked down over his big skull. His eyes were pale and too far apart and they held an odd vacant expression. He was about six feet one or two, and I guessed his weight at around two hundred. He wore dirty cotton slacks and heavy thick-soled shoes stained with oil and dust. A sweatstreaked pink shirt was open at the neck exposing damp black hair at the base of his thick white throat. He gave me a dull stare and then spoke to Greerson. "Hi, Boss. I got the mail."

"Thanks, Lester. Give it to Fran."

Lester shuffled across the room, gave me a sly glance, and entered the adjoining office. I heard him say, "Here's the mail, beautiful. Watcha doing tonight? How about stepping out with me?"

"Go away, Lester. I'm busy." Francine Hopkins sounded annoyed.

"Aw, now, baby! I got my jalopie all shined up and there's a keen cowboy show on at the drive-in. I'll show you a real good time."

She didn't answer, and I heard the busy sound of her typewriter. The kid came out, chuckling to himself, and headed for the door.

The kid turned slowly, leaning forward slightly with his arms hanging limply, an oddly simian posture. "Yes, Boss?" He spoke to Greerson, but he was watching me. I grinned at him, but there was no response. No expression, nothing. His mouth hung open a little.

Greerson said, "You can knock off now. The first thing in the morning pick up those letterheads at the printers and then help Louie load that shipment for Zanesville."

Slowly Lester's gaze swung to Greerson. "What?" he asked absently.

Greerson sighed, patiently repeated his instructions, winked at me and added, "What's the matter, Lester? Got your girls on your mind?"

Lester chuckled, and for the first time his eyes took on a glimmer of expression. "I got me a club," he said, "to keep 'em off me."

"That's the stuff," Greerson said. "Now get going."

Lester turned slowly and stared at me with a kind of sly insolence. He didn't speak, but the fingers of both his hands curled and uncurled, like sleepy white worms.

I felt a faint chill at the coldness in his eyes, but managed a grin. "Hi, Lester," I said.

He pulled the back of one hand across his loose mouth. "Get wise, sucker," he said. "She won't go out with you." He drew himself up and tapped his chest proudly. "Fran's my girl."

"Congratulations," I said, glancing uneasily at Greerson.

Greerson said sharply, "Go on home, Lester. Beat it."

He moved closer. I smelled the fetid odor of his breath and decided that he had very bad teeth. He said, "I got me a notion to teach you a lesson," and he lifted a pale fist.

"Stop it, Lester," Greerson snapped. "Go on home." He moved forward

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and grasped Lester's arm.

The kid shook off Greerson's hand and started a swing for me. I blocked it with a forearm and stepped back out of his way. He kept coming, swinging wildly. I held him off and cocked a fist. I wanted to hit him, and yet I hated to; it would have been like striking an unruly child. I saw Greerson move up behind him, his face angry. "Lester," he said grimly, "if you don't behave, by God, I'll —"

Lester took another swing at me. I ducked, picked a spot on Lester's chin and started a right jab. I didn't have much choice. But a voice stopped me.

"Don't hit him!" Francine Hopkins cried.

Greerson grabbed Lester then and held him. I turned toward the door to the inner office. Francine Hopkins stood there gazing at Lester with grave, sad eyes. "Go home, Lester," she said gently. "It's all right now."

Lester stared at her dumbly. Then he nodded and tears came into his pale eyes. Greerson released him and stepped back, sighing. Lester sniffled, pulled a sleeve across his nose, muttered, "I'm sorry, Boss," to Greerson and shuffled away. At the door he turned and stared at me. There was hate in his eyes and a kind of feral glitter. I had an odd chill feeling of fear, but I grinned at him and said, "No hard feelings, Lester."

"You wait," he said in a low intense voice. Then he went out and closed the door.

Francine Hopkins asked, "What happened?"

Greerson sighed again. "Oh, I guess Lester thought Bennett, there, was trying to date you up. He was jealous." He smiled at her. "You came out just in time. Bennett was about ready to slug him."

"Poor Lester," she said, and went back into her office.

I said to Greerson, "Who is he, anyhow?"

"Lester Beck. Office boy, handy man, and great lover — he thinks."

"You'd better keep a strait jacket handy," I said.

Greerson laughed shortly. "Lester's not that bad. He never caused any trouble before. His father, Jake, is my chief mechanic — been with me since I started the business — and he asked me to give Lester a job so that he could keep an eye on him. Lester's strong as a bull, and willing. Sometimes I let him ride with one of the drivers on a short haul. He helps to load and unload, and he loves it. He makes a little money for himself, and it's better than putting him away in some institution."

"Maybe you're right," I said dubiously, still thinking of Alfred Strickland, "as long as he don't get out of line."

Greerson frowned. "Usually he behaves very well — I can't understand what came over the kid just now. The girls around here kid him a lot, all of us do, I suppose, because he's got an idea he's hell with the women, but he usually takes it good-naturedly and pretends to try and date up the girls, like he did with Fran — he calls her his best girl."

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"How old is he?" I asked.

"Thirty-five, but his father told me that the clinic fixed his mental age at somewhere between four and ten."

"A moron," I said. "Maybe an imbecile." I didn't say it disparagingly; I was stating a medical fact. "At least, that's better than an idiot." I picked up my hat and moved to the door. "Thanks for letting me talk to Miss Hopkins."

"Wait a minute," Greerson said. "Don't be in a hurry. I'm ready to call it a day. How about a drink?"

I gazed at him curiously. He had seemed jittery when I'd first met him, and now he sat at his desk drumming fingers on the glass top and eyeing the whisky bottle. From the inner office I heard the sound of Francine Hopkins' typing. I wanted to talk to her again. Maybe if I hung around a while I would have the opportunity.

I said, "Thanks," to Greerson and sat in a chair beside his desk.

He took a paper cup from a drawer, handed it to me, and poured from the bottle. Then he tilted the bottle at me in a toasting gesture, drank, and followed with a swallow of the ginger ale. I drank, too.

Greerson said, a trifle thickly, "You married, Bennett?"

"No."

He sighed. "You're lucky."

"Maybe," I said. "Maybe not. Why?"

He gazed at me across the desk. His gray eyes held a bright glow. "Listen, Bennett; I just checked on you, all of a sudden, while you were talking to Fran. I called the police in Cleveland. They said you personally were okay. They said the agency you work for is okay, too. International reputation. Sort of a little F.B.I., only private."

I murmured something polite, wondering what he was up to. He filled my cup, and drank from the bottle. I drank again, too, and felt a definite warm glow in my stomach. It had been a long time since I'd had lunch outside of Cleveland.

"It's queer," Greerson said. "I sit here drinking and brooding — I hardly ever drink at the office — and you walk in. On a wild goose chase. Forget about Fran, Bennett." He hunched over the desk and peered at me intently. "How about working for me?"

I looked at him. He was serious. I said, "It depends."

"Choosey, huh?"

"I have to be." I was beginning to really like the bourbon, and poured myself another small drink.

He lit a cigarette with a hand that trembled a little, shoved the pack across the desk to me. I shook my head and worked on the whisky. He said, "I'm serious, and you can name your price."

"For doing what?"

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He gazed down at the cigarette between his fingers, and for a moment he didn't speak. Then he said in a low voice, "For doing a simple job — like catching a cheating wife."

"Whose wife?" I asked gently.

He looked up at me. There was pain in his eyes. "Mine," he said.

CHAPTER FOUR

I SAID CURIOUSLY, "How do you know this about your wife?"

He pushed himself back from the desk, stood up, strode to a window overlooking the street and spoke without turning around. "For one thing, I keep getting notes in the mail. Nasty little notes. 'Your wife is chasing around with another man. Get wise, sucker!' Stuff like that. I laughed them off at first, but they kept coming. I even showed one of them to Evelyn — my wife. She laughed, too. Some screwball, she said. Then she began going out at night and not telling me where. When I'd ask her, she'd say she was going to see the wife of one of our friends. I checked — she hadn't been there. That was a month ago. I didn't tell her I'd checked on her. I want to be sure first. And I'm away a lot. I've got terminals as far west as Texas. It's been hell. I've got to know, one way or the other."

"Did you ever follow her?" I asked.

"No," he said in a low voice. "I — I couldn't do that. Maybe, up until now, I didn't want to know, for certain."

I said, "I'm sorry. I can't help you. But there are men who specialize in that sort of thing. You'll need evidence, maybe pictures. I can give you the name of a reliable man. It'll cost you twenty or thirty dollars a day, plus expenses."

He hit the desk with a fist. "I don't want any two-bit snooper. I want you. I want a fast, clean job, and —"

The phone on his desk began to ring. He picked it up and said, "Yes" in an angry voice. He listened a moment, and then said carefully, "Yes, honey, I'll be home for dinner." He paused, raised bleak eyes to me, and added, "I'm bringing a guest, a Mr. Bennett, from Cleveland. . . . Yes, he's in the office now. Okay? . . . Fine. See you in a little while." He hung up and said grimly, "My wife wants you for dinner."

"Sorry," I told him, "but Mr. Bennett from Cleveland was suddenly called away. Mr. Bennett sends his regrets."

He pulled a hand down over his face in a hopeless gesture. Then he leaned over the desk and spoke in a low, resigned voice. There was sweat on his temples, in spite of the air conditioning. "All right, I'll make a deal;

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I hate to lose Fran, but I'll talk her into going home with you — if you'll do that job for me."

I thought fast. And I admitted to myself that the five hundred dollar bonus Mrs. Hopkins had promised me tinted my thoughts. I said, "You're certain you can influence Francine?"

"Yes. She'll listen to me. I've been kind of a combination boss and big brother to her. She came to me broke and scared. I felt sorry for her, and I needed a girl right then. She picked up things fast — she'd had typing and shorthand in high school. When my last secretary got married, I gave Fran the job. She — well, she respects me. I'll talk to her like a Dutch uncle. She'll do what I say."

"What if she won't?"

He sighed and said bleakly, "Then the deal's off. What can you lose?"

"All right." I stood up. "It's a deal, Mr. Greerson."

He held out a hand. "Call me Jack."

We shook hands, and I said, "My name's Jim. What if I find out that your wife is — uh — innocent?"

He shook his head and said in an oddly strained voice, "I can't hope for that." He went to a closet, took out a gray herringbone jacket, and came back carrying it over an arm. "I'll talk to Fran the first thing in the morning. I know she'll do as I advise — I'll even give her a leave of absence from her job. Can she work until the end of the week?"

"Her mother has waited two years," I said. "She can wait a few days longer." I paused, and then said carefully, "There's one thing more; I'll need a little more background on your wife — and you. I like all the facts when I start a job."

His eyes were suddenly alert. "Meaning what?" he asked softly.

"Just what I said."

He eyed me for a moment. Then he turned away, opened the door to the adjoining office, and said, "I'm leaving now, Fran. Lock up, will you?"

There was a short silence. Then I heard Francine Hopkins say quietly, "All right, Jack. I — I'll leave my keys with the night dispatcher."

"Leave your keys?" Greerson asked blankly. "Why?"

"I'm sorry, Jack. This is short notice, I know, but I'm quitting tonight."

Greerson looked over his shoulder and gave me a bewildered look. Then he moved into the office. I wasn't invited, but I followed as far as the doorway. Francine Hopkins faced us, her hands folded in her lap. Greerson forced a laugh. "You're kidding, Fran."

She shook her head slowly. "No, Jack. I mean it. I — I'm going away."

Greerson turned on me angrily. "Damn it, Bennett, this is your fault. You got her all upset, and —"

"No," Francine broke in. "Mr. Bennett had nothing to do with it. I've planned it for some time, but I didn't want to tell you."

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"But you can't just walk out on me," Greerson protested.

Greerson took a deep breath. "Listen, Fran, I don't want you to go. I'll pay you more money, if that's it. Think it over, and we'll talk about it tomorrow."

"No. I'm sorry. I'm leaving tonight."

"But, Fran," he said with faint desperateness, "you can't do this to me. I — I need you . . ."

I looked at him quickly. It seemed odd that a mere employer should plead with an employee who wanted to quit. I was raised in the if-you-don't-like-it-here-get-a-job-someplace-else school. Jack Greerson's attitude violated all the rules of labor relations. A separation interview was fine, but when an employee made up his mind to quit, it was best to let him quit. And then I had another odd thought, but perhaps it wasn't an odd thought at all. Was there something between Greerson and Francine Hopkins? Something more intimate than the ordinary boss-secretary relationship? If so, it might explain Mrs. Greerson's alleged infidelity. Sauce for the goose stuff. Knowing what I did of Francine Hopkins, it was not beyond the realm of possibility. And Francine was attractive enough . . .

She said, "Please — don't make it harder for me."

Greerson glanced at me, and I knew he wanted me to leave. I left. The outer office beyond the glass partition was empty. As I walked slowly along the sidewalk in the shade of the building I glanced idly in the windows. A movement inside caught my eye and I stopped, peering. Through the glass partition I saw the entrance to Jack Greerson's office and the silhouettes of Greerson and Francine Hopkins. He was holding her close and kissing her hungrily. As I watched, they broke away, stood close together for a moment, and then Greerson turned and walked down the hall toward the entrance. Francine moved away, presumably back into her office.

I was standing by my car when Greerson came out carrying his coat. He paused, gazed about, spotted me, and came up and stood beside me. His eyes were bleak. I moped my face some more. "Hot," I said.

"I guess our deal's off," he said in a tight voice. "I can't talk her out of leaving. She — she's made up her mind."

"Well," I said, "you tried."

He looked at me quickly.

I decided to tell him. If he'd had any ideas of using me to frame his wife so that he could be free to marry Francine, or to live with her, or whatever the hell he had in mind, he was wrong.

I nodded at the windows and said, "I wasn't snooping — I just happened to see you in there. A real touching scene."

He flushed, and for an instant anger flashed in his eyes. I watched him warily, thinking that he might take a swing at me. But he didn't, and spoke in a controlled voice. "Sure, I kissed her. It didn't mean anything. She's

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going away, and — what the hell business is it of yours?"

"None. No offense. Did she tell you where she was going? And why?"

He nodded gloomily. "I finally got it out of her. It's a hell of a thing — she's making a big mistake. She asked me not to tell anybody."

"You can tell me, can't you?"

"I may as well," he said with an edge of sarcasm to his voice, "You'd probably find it out anyhow."

"Probably," I said.

His expression hardened. "Believe it or not, she's going away tonight with some damned musician. Seems she's had a crush on him since she was sixteen. The jerk is playing here tonight at a place south of town." He paused, and added bitterly, "she's going to meet him there tonight — and get married in New York."

I sighed. My first hunch had been right. And Johnny Wingate had lied to me.

CHAPTER FIVE

HE HELD OUT A HAND AND FORCED A GRIN. "It looks like we both lost Fran. I'll have to find a new secretary now. . . . The invitation to dinner still stands, if you'd care to come." There was almost a pleading note in his voice.

I shook my head. "Thanks, but there's no point in it now. Give your wife my regrets."

He nodded silently and moved across the lot to a new cream-colored Buick sedan parked at the far end of the brick office building. I lit a cigarette and watched him drive away. Then I waited.

It was a quarter after six when Francine Hopkins came out. She stood for a moment on the steps adjusting the strap of a purse over her shoulder. Under one arm she held a bulky package wrapped in brown paper. She was small, but her figure was trim and neat, and perhaps a trifle thin, and the yellow sunlight made blue glints in her smoothly combed black hair. I threw away my cigarette and moved up to her. When she saw me, she frowned.

"I've been waiting," I said. "It took you a long time."

She gazed down at me gravely. "You're wasting your time, Mr. Bennett. I won't go back to Mother." She looked out at the street. "There'll be a bus along in a few minutes."

"It'll be crowded," I told her, and nodded at the Mercury. "My car's right there."

She hesitated, her small white teeth biting at her plump lower lip in

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indecision. Then she made up her mind and smiled at me. "All right — but my answer is still 'No.' "

"Good enough." She permitted me to carry the package to the car, and when we were heading down High Street, I asked, "Where to?"

"Home. I live on —"

"I know where you live," I said, smiling at her. "I was there this afternoon and talked to Mrs. Carewe."

"I see," she said thoughtfully. "She told you where I worked?"

I nodded, and paid attention to my driving. Presently she got a cigarette from her purse, and I plugged in the dash lighter. As I held it for her, she gazed at me over the cigarette and said, "You don't look like a lawyer — not like the others Mother sent."

"What do I look like?"

"What do you look like?" Francine Hopkins said. "I can't decide. You look a little, well, hard, but your eyes are kind — I always notice people's eyes. The other lawyers who came to see me smiled at me, but their eyes didn't smile, and I knew they weren't really interested in me, but only in the fee Mother would pay them for bringing me home. But you seemed — sincere, as if you really thought it best for *me*."

"I do," I said sincerely, thinking of the five hundred dollar bonus for the agency, and the resultant approval of the boss in New York. "I was thinking of you, Francine — may I call you that?" I was simply overflowing with sincerity.

"Of course. Most of my friends call me Fran, but I really like Francine better. It's what —" She stopped abruptly.

"Who calls you Francine?" I prompted, thinking of Johnny Wingate. "Your mother?"

It was a mistake. She didn't answer for a moment, and when she spoke her voice was bitter. "Please don't mention my mother. To her I was always Francine Christina, the full treatment. Never just Francine, or even Fran, or honey or dear or darling. Always Francine Christina, and sometimes, when she was angry with me, she'd add Hopkins, to make it complete. I . . ." Her voice broke and she turned away on the seat.

I stopped for a traffic light, waited for it to change, started up again. I didn't say anything. Presently Francine spoke again in a low quiet voice. "I'm sorry Mother is so ill, but I can't go home now. It's too late." As I moved the Mercury's gear lever into Park, I noticed a new red Pontiac convertible parked across the street. A man sat behind the wheel.

Francine Hopkins saw the Pontiac, too, and clapped a hand to her mouth. "Oh, golly — I forgot all about my date with Glenn."

"Who's Glenn?"

"Glenn Malone. He works for a loan company down town. We've been dating a little, and he's really very nice, but . . ." She sighed, gathered

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up her purse and package, and opened the car door. "Thanks very much for bringing me home."

"You're welcome," I said, getting out, too.

The man across the street left the Pontiac and moved over to us, a smile on his face. As he took the package from the girl, he said, "You're late, Fran."

"I'm sorry. I — I had to work late." She nodded at me. "Glenn, this is Mr. Bennett."

The young man stopped smiling as he looked at me, and a suspicious, worried look crossed his face. Then I guess he decided that I was too old to be serious competition, and he smiled again and held out a hand. He was maybe twenty-five, with a sun-burned boyish face, nice teeth and brown hair neatly combed on the side.

As we shook hands, he grinned. "Always glad to meet a prospect, Mr. Bennett."

"A prospect for what?"

He nodded at my Mercury. "It's time you traded that heap off — going to need new rubber all around pretty soon. I'll be glad to finance the deal for you."

I remembered that Francine had told me that he worked for a loan company, and I said, "Thanks. If I decide to trade, I'll let you know."

He took a card from one of the breast pockets of his jacket and handed it to me. "We'll be glad to be of service. The Friendly Finance and Loan Company. Just ask for me. I'm the assistant manager."

I pocketed the card, said, "Thanks," again, and spoke to Francine Hopkins. "Good luck."

Her eyes wavered for an instant, and her small chin trembled. Then she looked at me directly, almost defiantly. "Thank you. Goodbye, Mr. Bennett." As she turned away, Malone nodded at me in friendly fashion, took the girl's arm, and they walked up to the house together. She went inside. Malone sat on the top porch step, carefully pulling up the knees of his creased slacks. As I got into the Mercury and drove away, he waved at me.

I had dinner in a little place off High Street, close to the campus. It was dark when I drove again to 1647 Puxatawny Street. The new Pontiac was gone, but there was a dim light inside the house. Once more I went up to the porch and rang the bell. Mrs. Carewe came and peered at me through the screen. "Good evening," I said.

"Oh, it's you again," she said in her tired voice. "You've missed her. She came home, but she's gone now."

"Did she say when she'd be back?"

"Around ten, she said." Mrs. Carewe sighed. "If you want to see her,

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you'd better be here then. She's leaving town tonight." she sighed again. "She's packed her things. I'll hate to lose her. Francine was a good roomer . . . Do you know of some reliable person who would like a nice front room?"

"Not at the moment. Uh — did she say where she was going?"

Mrs. Carewe shook her head absently. "Not exactly — something about a job out of town. New York, I think she said." She sighed once more. "They come and they go."

"Yes," I said. "Thank you."

"You're welcome, I'm sure." Mrs. Carewe turned and moved slowly back into the murky hall.

I went back to my car. Twenty minutes after nine. Forty minutes to kill. I drove along the curb a short distance, away from a street light, parked beneath an over-hanging oak tree, and turned off the lights. It was hot in the car and the air was oppressive. I smoked a cigarette, not enjoying it, and when I put it out I flicked on the dash light. A quarter of ten. I yawned, stretched, and rested my head against the back of the seat, my panama tilted over my eyes. Maybe I dozed a little. After a while I aroused, turned on the dash light again. Ten-twenty. I sat up straight, pushed my hat back and rubbed my eyes. A car coasted to a stop in front of Mrs. Carewe's house and its lights went off. A new red Pontiac convertible. The door on the right side opened and Francine Hopkins got out and hurried up to the porch. I could see her quite clearly in the glow from the street light. Then the Pontiac's lights came on again, its motor roared, and it leaped forward with a vicious squeal of rubber on pavement. I guessed it was doing fifty before it reached the next block. As the red tail lights faded, I thought, *She's told him, and he's taking it very badly.*

I waited and watched. Francine Hopkins entered the house and presently a light came on behind the drawn shades of a window in an upstairs room facing the street. A shadow moved back and forth behind the shades, and after a while the light went out. I got out of the car and stood in the shadow of the oak tree. I couldn't see my wrist watch, but it must have been close to eleven when Francine Hopkins came out on the porch carrying two bags, one large, the other smaller. Mrs. Carewe came out with her, and I saw her lean and kiss Francine on the cheek. They talked a moment, and then Mrs. Carewe went back inside. I crossed the street and stood at the foot of the porch steps. "Hello, Francine," I said softly.

She smiled down at me, standing between the two bags. Even in the dim light I could see the happy shine in her eyes. She wore a simple little tailored suit, maybe beige or pale blue — I couldn't tell in the murky light — and a perky little straw hat. "Oh," she said lightly, "it's Mr. Bennett. Poor Mr. Bennett. Mother is paying him to bring me home, and I'm not going home. Isn't that sad, Mr. Bennett?"

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I gazed at her uneasily, and moved up a couple of steps so that I could see her better. She sounded like a girl who'd had one drink too many — or who was on the frantic edge of hysteria. But she could have been just happy. I nodded at the bags. "Going away?"

She stopped smiling and said quietly. "You know I am. And I think you know where."

"Yes, Francine, I know."

"You haven't given up, have you? You still think I'll go home?"

I shook my head, in answer to her second question. "Not any more, Francine, but I'll be glad to drive you to Rainbow Terrace. You're meeting him there, aren't you?"

"Yes, but I've called a taxi."

"I'll take you." I went up the remaining steps and picked up her bags.

"It won't do you any good. I won't —"

"All right." I grinned at her. "Let's go."

She hesitated only a moment. Then she followed me across the street to the Mercury. I put the bags on the rear seat, held the door open for her. She sat silently as I headed the car in the general direction of Rainbow Terrace.

CHAPTER SIX

When we were driving down High Street, I said, "Apparently your friend took it pretty hard — judging from the way he drove away."

"Yes," she said quietly. "Poor Glenn. I hated it, but I had to tell him. He — he wanted to marry me. I told him about Johnny, who he is. I should have told him before, but our plans weren't complete until a few days ago, and I was so excited I forgot all about my date with Glenn tonight.

"I should never have left Johnny," she said quietly. "I suppose Mother told you about it?"

"Some of it."

"She blames Johnny, but it wasn't his fault — not really. What happened two years ago — I blame myself for that. Maybe Johnny was a little wild then, but so was I, even if I was a — a love-struck infant. Neither of us knew what we had, and we quarreled, over a girl. I've even forgotten her name. But I left Johnny and went to Detroit, and then to Bay City. I guess you know the rest. After I was back home, I kept track of Johnny and wrote to him, in care of a girl friend — I didn't want his letters coming to the house for Mother to see. Things got worse and worse at home. Mother was

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very — bitter. When I was eighteen I left and came here. I got a job in a restaurant and took a night course and brushed up on my high school shorthand and typing. Then I went to work for Jack Greerson. And all the time Johnny and I were writing. He was on the road with a band and we never had a chance to see each other. Then Johnny formed his own band, and it was a success. Last month he came here to see me. It was — wonderful, like it was at first. We decided to get married. Three days ago he called me from Detroit, said he was playing in Columbus tonight, and then going to New York for a long engagement there. He wants me to go with him. We'll be married in New York — as soon as we can." Her voice rose in happiness.

We reached Rainbow Terrace and I drove slowly between a mass of parked cars. By some miracle there was an empty space close to the front entrance. I pulled into it, stopped, turned off the lights and motor. The sound of music came clearly out to us, a fast jazzy number, sweet and yet hot, with a throaty sax section backed up by a power house of brass. And above it all a trumpet soared and floated to the fast beat of the drums.

"That's Johnny," Francine Hopkins breathed. "The trumpet. Isn't he wonderful?"

"Yes," I admitted, thinking that a musician either had it, or he didn't. Johnny Wingate had it.

"Go on in," I said gently. "Tell him you're here."

She turned suddenly, leaned toward me half rising and kissed me lightly on the mouth. I was too surprised to move or speak. She said softly, "That's for being so nice. Tell Mother I'll write to her." Then she slid out of the car and ran to the entrance of Rainbow Terrace. I watched as she paused briefly at the ticket window on the lighted porch, and then she entered the big ball room and disappeared among the dancers there.

And then I remembered the bags in the rear of the car.

I turned and looked at them. Two bags, one brown, one black, both imitation leather, inexpensive bags, but not cheap. I got out of the car, put on my coat, took from the breast pocket the ticket Johnny Wingate had given me, and went up the steps to the ticket booth. A rather attractive middle-aged woman took the pass, nodded pleasantly and motioned me to go on in. I entered the ball room.

The orchestra was playing softly now, and a big colored crystal in the vaulted ceiling revolved slowly and cast moving rainbow lights over the dancing couples.

I circled the floor, avoiding the dancing couples, and came to the band shell at the far end. Two youths were standing there listening in rapt admiration. I said to one of them, "Where's Wingate?"

He nodded toward the rear of the platform without taking his gaze from the orchestra. I moved along a short passageway, opened a door in the

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shadows there. As I did so Sally Valdez came through and brushed past me. She was wearing a strapless ice-blue evening gown which rustled as she moved. I stepped aside, but she never even glanced at me. She was lovely, even though her hazel eyes were hot and angry-looking, and she smelled delightful. I turned and watched her as she lifted the flaring skirt, revealing slim legs, and stepped up to the band platform, where she sat in a chair before the piano and smiled out at the dancers, her eyes glittering like jewels in the light. I went through the door and closed it. I stood in a narrow hallway, weakly illuminated by a bare ceiling bulb. Instrument cases and piles of music were stacked in a corner. On the floor were smashed cigarette butts, empty soda bottles and two whisky bottles, also empty, the remains, I guessed, of the musician's intermission. On my left were two doors, side by side, one labeled *Men*, the other *Women*. A sign over both said *Private — Employees Only*. Ahead of me, down a short flight of steps, was another door, standing slightly ajar. I went down the steps, saw that the door bore a spring lock with the catch protruding. I turned the knob releasing the catch and secured it. I didn't want the door blowing shut and locking me out. I stepped out into the night.

Between the dark trees I saw the moonlit glitter of the river and the faint twinkling lights of the city beyond. I was at the rear of the pavilion, with the porch above me.

Something moved near the lilac bushes. I stiffened. Then I heard a kind of soft strangled sound, and a figure came running at me out of the darkness. I stepped forward quickly. The dim light from behind me revealed the contorted face of Francine Hopkins, and the next second she was in my arms, clinging to me, sobbing wildly, her fingers digging into my back. I got her by the arms, pushed her clear and shook her a little. "What's the matter?" I asked sharply.

She turned and pointed. I saw her white strained face and the black outline of her open mouth. I left her and ran to the lilac bushes.

Johnny Wingate lay on his back, one leg doubled beneath his body, his arms flung wide. I knelt down and I could see him very clearly in the moonlight. He wore dark trousers, a cummerbund, a white single-breasted dinner jacket, a neatly knotted straight black bow tie. There were three distinct black blotches on the white front of his shirt. His eyes were half open, and so was his mouth. I touched his cheek. It was still warm.

Inside the dance hall the music began again, a slow waltz.

I stood up and went back to Francine Hopkins. She was huddled against the wall, her hands over her face, and she was repeating a name in a dry sobbing whisper. "Johnny, Johnny, Johnny . . ."

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CHAPTER SEVEN

I LED HER AROUND THE BUILDING to my car and sat in the front seat beside her. After a while her sobbing stopped. I lit a cigarette and handed it to her. As she took it, her fingers touched mine. They were cold. She drew on the cigarette and expelled a deep shuddering sigh. "He — he's dead?"

"Yes," I said.

I touched her shoulder. "We have a little time, but not much. Feel like telling me about it?" I took the cigarette from between her fingers and crushed it out.

She shivered again, and then her body was still. She began to speak in a low strained voice, with hysteria just beneath the surface. "They — they told me he was out in back. I went out there. I didn't see him. I walked around, and I — I stumbled over him . . ." Her voice broke and the sobbing began again.

I patted her shoulder, wishing I had a drink to give her. She was going to need a drink, or something. I said, "See anybody out there?"

She took a deep ragged breath. "No — not outside. I passed a girl in the little room behind the orchestra platform . . ."

"The singer? Sally Valdez?"

"I — I think so."

I thought about that a moment. Then I said, "I've got to call the police."

She uttered a low moan of protest.

"I'm sorry. We just can't leave him lying out there."

She began to sob again.

It was a mess. The detective sergeant who arrived in response to my phone call did not bring plenty of help, as I had suggested. He had to send for reinforcements. Even then, it was all four plainclothesmen and two uniformed men could do to keep the dance crowd away while the lab men and the photographers did their work in the area around the lilac bushes. After they had taken Johnny Wingate's body away, the members of the band made a half-hearted on-with-the-dance attempt, but only a few couples were on the floor. The rest of the crowd either left or stood around outside in little groups talking about the shooting.

The detective sergeant in charge was a man named Corzetti, a thin dark Italian with a lean hawk's face, a thin black mustache, and very brown, very sharp eyes. He appeared to be efficient and conducted the inevitable questioning and the routine procedures with a minimum of fuss and confusion.

He gravely inspected my credentials, admitted that he knew of my

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agency, and appeared to accept my reason for being in Columbus and at Rainbow Terrace. I told him all that I thought it necessary for him to know, and remarked that because of the developments I might now be able to accomplish my mission and return Francine Hopkins to her mother. Corzetti took a dim view of this and replied, rather tersely, that both Miss Hopkins and Miss Valdez were material witnesses and would not be permitted to leave the city, at least not for the present. He also suggested that I remain on tap for a day or two, and asked where I was staying. I told him I was registered at the Deshler.

Johnny Wingate had not been robbed. His wallet containing a hundred and ten dollars had been found in the inside pocket of his dinner jacket, and he still wore an expensive gold wrist watch and a sizeable diamond ring. They did not find the murder weapon. Pending the coroner's report, Corzetti guessed that it was a .32 revolver or automatic, fired at close range. Bullets from a heavier gun, he pointed out, would have completely penetrated Wingate's body, while the murder bullets had not. And the music from the dance hall would have drowned out the sound of the shots. I agreed.

"Three of them," Corzetti said. "Bang, bang bang — all within an area covered by the palm of a hand. He certainly made certain that Wingate would die."

"He?" I asked.

Corzetti shrugged his spare shoulders. "He. She. We'll find out."

I believed him. My respect for Sergeant Corzetti was growing, and I thought uneasily of the little things I hadn't told him; that I'd seen Jack Greerson kissing Francine Hopkins, that Greerson was having wife trouble, and that Glenn Malone had roared off in a rage after Francine had told him that she was going to marry Johnny Wingate. Corzetti already knew about Sally Valdez. He knew all about her, much more than I had suspected. The men in the band had talked freely. Obviously Sally had not endeared herself to them. Skippy Delane, the piano player with the red mustache, had talked the most. He said that Sally Valdez had been "nuts" about Wingate, but declined to say whether or not Wingate had reciprocated. "Of course," he said carelessly, "Johnny loved 'em all."

Under further questioning, Delane admitted that Johnny Wingate had confided to him that he was getting married as soon as they returned to New York, and that his bride-to-be was joining him that evening. "I warned him," Delane said, "that he'd have trouble with Sally when the new babe showed up, but he just laughed it off."

Skippy Delane, it developed, was the arranger for the band and often took over its leadership in Johnny's absence, which, according to Delane, was frequently. The pianist didn't actually say so, but he established the definite impression that he could run the band very well without Johnny,

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maybe even better. "I loved the guy," he declared, "but he was, well, irresponsible. Why, one night we were booked at the Aragon Plaza in Kansas City and he got mixed up with a little redhead from the check room and never showed up at all. I had to take over. Man, we really rocked 'em that night!"

Corzetti scowled and asked, "Did Wingate really intend to marry the Hopkins girl?"

Delane shrugged. "Yeah, I think so. He said her old lady had money and that the gal was an only child. Johnny was never one to miss any angles, but you couldn't tell about him. I loved the guy, but —"

"You said that," Corzetti cut in coldly. "Do you think he told Miss Valdez that he intended to marry Miss Hopkins?"

"Why should he?" Delane spread his hands. "Sally just worked for him."

"I gathered that the relationship was a little more intimate," Corzetti said dryly. "Would you say that Miss Valdez was jealous of Wingate, or of Miss Hopkins?"

"Now, look, Lieutenant," Delane protested. "Don't go putting words in my mouth. Sally up-staged all the boys in the band — except Johnny — but I give her credit; she can sing like an angel, and she looks like an angel. You wouldn't ever think that she was capable of raising hell with Johnny, just because he maybe smiled at a babe in the dance crowd."

Corzetti said, "Then you would say that Miss Valdez *was* of a jealous nature — where Wingate was concerned?"

"Yes, Lieutenant," Delane said ruefully, then added, "I guess that's all I can do to help. Except . . ." He paused, smoothed his red mustache with a forefinger, and gazed at Corzetti almost slyly. "Except for one thing."

Corzetti sighed. "And what is that?"

"I think maybe you should know this," Delane said seriously, frowning a little. "Last night we all stayed in a motel outside Detroit. I was next to Johnny's room. Sally was there with him, after we played the job. She was giving him hell again, and I heard her scream that she would — well, that she would kill him if he didn't do something — I didn't catch it all."

Corzetti eyed him coldly and didn't speak.

"Honest, Sergeant," Delane said. "Don't take my word for it. Two of the boys were with me. They heard it too."

Suddenly Corzetti smiled, but his eyes remained cold. Skippy Delane didn't notice the coldness, but I did. The sergeant said pleasantly, "Thank you. I appreciate your cooperation. Tell me something more; you apparently are second in command — what will happen to this celebrated and popular orchestra, now that Wingate is dead? You going to take over?"

Delane's eyes blazed. "You're damn right well! I had my own band once, and for years before that I played with Whiteman and Lombardo and Garber and all the really great bands. Then I borrowed money and

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formed my own combine and sweated it out from B-girl joints to the flossy ball rooms, and I hit big. Then a big name bastard on the skids bought off my men, staged a come-back with what I'd built up, and cashed in. Me, I went back to playing for peanuts, for pretty boys like Johnny Wingate with a cute smile and just enough brains to read a few notes. I —" He stopped abruptly, and the flame died in his eyes. He fished a cigarette from the pocket of his white coat, lit it and inhaled deeply. "Sorry, Sergeant. I guess I just got sort of carried away. Johnny treated me fine. I loved the guy. It's just that . . ." He made a helpless gesture and smiled at Corzetti a trifle sheepishly. But there was something else in his expression, I thought. Maybe fear.

"I think I understand," Corzetti said, still smiling pleasantly, but with the same chill sheen in his brown eyes. "Did Miss Valdez 'up-stage' you, also?"

Skippy Delane smiled bleakly, and spoke in an oddly quiet voice. "That's right, Lieutenant — I mean Sergeant. All of us in the band are dirt to Sally, including me."

"I thought so," Corzetti said wearily. He turned and motioned to one of his aides. "Bring him downtown for further questioning, along with Miss Valdez and Miss Hopkins." He looked at me and smiled thinly. "You come along, too, Bennett."

"Yes, Sergeant," I said, thinking bleakly that it was going to be a long night. It was already an hour past midnight.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE SINGER had changed her blue evening dress for a red skirt and a white blouse. She seemed pale beneath the harsh light, but her make-up was carefully applied and her hair was neatly combed.

Johnny Wingate, she said, told her he was going out for a smoke. A few minutes later, when a number was over, she left to go to what she called "the powder room" behind the orchestra platform. She was there maybe four or five minutes. Then she returned to her place with the orchestra. She had not gone outside, had not seen Johnny Wingate at that time. She did not remember passing me in the doorway, and she had not seen Francine Hopkins at any time. When she had finished, she wiped a tear from the corner of one eye with the back of a hand and said huskily, "That's all I know about it, Sergeant."

Corzetti thanked her gravely and turned to Francine Hopkins. She sat very still, watching him, and although her small rather thin face was as

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pale as Sally Valdez's, she seemed more composed than the singer. "Miss Hopkins, how did you know that Wingate was outside the building? Had he sent you a message to meet him there?"

She shook her head quickly. "No. We had just arranged to meet tonight at Rainbow Terrace. When I saw that he was not with the band, I asked a couple at a table close by where Johnny had gone. They said they had just seen him leave by the door at the rear of the platform. I went to the door and opened it. Johnny was not in the small room back there. I thought he might be in the — the men's room, and I waited a few minutes. When he didn't come out, I went down the steps to the outside door, and went out, and I — I found him . . ." Her mouth trembled and she lowered her head. I noticed then that her hands were clasped tightly together. A small diamond was on the third finger, left hand. I saw its bluish wink in the light and thought dismally that maybe Johnny Wingate really had intended to marry her this time. Anyhow, there were no rings on Sally Valdez's fingers.

Corzetti prompted Francine gently. "And he was already dead? He said nothing?"

She shook her head silently.

"And then, right after you found him dead by the lilac bushes, Mr. Bennett came out?"

She nodded without looking up and spoke in a low strained voice. "Yes. The door opened and I saw Mr. Bennett in the light. I ran to him . . ."

"Thank you," Corzetti said abruptly and stood up. "We can do no more tonight." His gaze swung to me, and then back to the three persons sitting against the wall. "None of you are under arrest at this time. However, I must ask all of you to remain in this city until you are informed that you may leave."

"No!" Skippy Delane was on his feet. "My God, the band is booked in New York tomorrow night."

"I'm sorry." Corzetti glanced at a wrist watch. "Perhaps we can clear this up in time to keep your engagement." He smiled thinly, nodded at the rest of us, and went out.

I said to the room at large. "I have my car outside. Any of you care for a lift?"

Delane sighed. "Thanks. You can take me back to the dance hall. I told the boys to wait for me there." He looked at Sally Valdez and grinned wickedly. "I don't know about her."

She said, "Some of my bags are in Johnny's car."

"I'll take you both," I said.

Sally Valdez smiled at me. When she smiled, she looked more like an angel than ever. "That's very kind of you," she said sweetly.

I went over to where Francine Hopkins sat quietly by the wall. "How

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about you?" I asked gently. "Want to go back to Mrs. Carewe's?"

"I — I guess so. There's no place else . . ."

"Come on," I said, touching her arm. "Let's go."

The two girls sat in back. Skippy Delane rode in front with me. It was three o'clock in the morning when we reached Rainbow Terrace. The members of the band were asleep in the big bus. They awoke when Delane arrived and gathered around him, asking excited questions. "We gotta stay here for a while," I heard him tell them. "We may as well go back to the motel."

Groaning and muttering the musicians got back into the bus. As Delane climbed up behind the wheel, I asked him, "What motel?"

"Down the road about a mile. We checked in today. It's called The Riverview." He sighed. "I guess it's up to me to take over." He started the bus and put it in gear.

I moved away and looked around for Johnny Wingate's Cadillac. I didn't see it, but a police car was parked in the shadows and I heard the mutter of a radio. I went over to the car. A uniformed policeman was behind the wheel. Another leaned against the front fender smoking a cigarette. I said to him, "Where's Wingate's car?"

"Down town," he said shortly. "Corzetti's orders."

"There were some bags in it. Belonged to —"

"Sorry," he cut in. "You'll have to see the sergeant in the morning."

The big bus circled the dance hall and headed for the highway. The policeman behind the wheel of the cruise car said, "Come on, George. There they go."

"They're going to The Riverview motel," I said.

"Sure. We'll just check it." The second officer got inside and the car moved away, following the bus.

I went back to my car, leaned in the window and spoke to Sally Valdez. "I'm sorry. They took Johnny's car down town, but you can probably get your bags in the morning."

"It doesn't matter," she said tonelessly. "I won't need them tonight. Most of my things are in my room."

"You can stay with me tonight," Francine Hopkins said, almost timidly. "I'll loan you what you need."

"No, thanks," Sally Valdez said coldly. "I'll manage."

Francine Hopkins said nothing.

"The others have gone to the motel," I told the singer. "Want me to take you there?"

"No," she said shortly. There was a short silence, and then she added in a distinct voice. "Johnny and I were registered at the MacFarland Hotel. Take me there."

"You and Johnny didn't bunk with the rest of the band?"

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"Of course not." Her voice was almost a travesty of disdain.

"I see," I said to Sally Valdez, opened the car and got behind the wheel.

As I circled the drive around Rainbow Terrace, I saw the dark bulk of a car slide out from beneath the trees and follow me. Its lights came on as we hit the highway, and I knew then that Detective Sergeant Corzetti was also keeping watch on Sally Valdez and Francine Hopkins. And maybe me.

The MacFarland was not the best hotel in Columbus, but it wasn't the worst, either. I stopped before a canvas marquee. As Sally Valdez got out, she gave me a curt, "Thank you," and without speaking to Francine Hopkins she hurried across the sidewalk.

I said, "You're welcome," but she was already inside. I turned in the seat and spoke to Francine. "You look lonesome back there. Come up in front with me."

Obediently she got out, climbed into the front seat beside me and closed the door left open by Sally Valdez. As I pulled away, I said to Francine, "I haven't had a chance to tell you yet — but I'm sorry."

"Thank you." Her voice was quiet and under control.

"What'll you do now? Go back to work for Greerson?"

"I — I don't know."

We reached High Street and cruised for some minutes without either of us speaking.

I turned into Puxetawnay Street and presently stopped before Mrs. Carewe's house. Except for a dim light behind an upper window, the place was dark. And the street was dark, too, and quiet. I sat with my hands on the wheel, feeling the heat move in, and I said, "I'll carry your bags up. Will you answer a question first?"

Her hand was on the door latch, but she paused. "Of course," she said.

"Did Johnny say anything — when you found him? Before he died? Anything at all? I know that Sergeant Corzetti asked you the same question, and you said that he had not. You've had a little time now. Maybe you might remember something . . ." I waited.

She stirred in the heat and the gloom. "I — I've been trying to remember. When the policeman asked me, I was confused — I couldn't think, remember. I knelt beside Johnny, and —" She stopped.

"Yes?" I waited some more.

When she spoke, her voice was low and strained, as if she couldn't swallow. "He — he was still alive. I remember now. I — I think he knew me, and tried to tell me something. But it was just mumbling, and then he was so — so still . . ." Her voice broke.

I reached out and touched her shoulder. "It may be important. Try and remember. Could he have mentioned a name, a description? Anything?"

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She was silent for a moment. Then she said hesitantly, "I — I think I remember — but it doesn't mean anything. It sounded like two words — I barely heard him. One of them was 'bush,' I think, or something like that. And the other may have been a man's name, but I couldn't be certain."

Slowly my fingers tightened on the wheel, and I said carefully, "He was lying by the lilac bushes. Maybe the person who killed him hid behind them. What was the name you think he said?"

"It sounded like 'Jack,' but I can't be sure. He — he . . ." She began to sob quietly.

I thought about what she had said. I knew several Jacks, but they were far away. The only Jack I knew in the vicinity of Columbus, Ohio, was Jack Greerson, owner of The Greerson Trucking Company, and the ex-employer of Francine Hopkins. Had Johnny Wingate known him, too? If so, how? But there were a million men named Jack, which was also a nickname for John.

Francine's sobbing stopped, and she took a deep sighing breath. I said, "Did Greerson know Johnny Wingate? Had they ever met?"

"No," she said, and fumbled for the door latch. Her face was averted and in shadow and I couldn't tell if the implication of my question had hit her.

I leaned across her and opened the door. "Take it easy," I told her, as she stepped out to the sidewalk. She waited silently while I got her bags from the rear of the car and then followed me up to the porch. I put down the bags and pressed the bell button beside the screen door. It was maybe three minutes before a light came on in the hall. Mrs. Carewe came down the stairs wearing a faded bathrobe. She peered at us through the glass, and then unlocked the door and opened it.

I said through the screen, "We're sorry to bother you at this hour, but Miss Hopkins would like her room back."

She recognized Francine then, and must have seen the look of misery on the girl's face. Quick fingers unhooked the screen door and Mrs. Carewe uttered a smothered expression of pity as she embraced Francine. The door slammed shut and through the glass I saw Mrs. Carewe tenderly helping Francine up the stairs. As I left the porch, I hoped the bags would be safe, and decided that presently Francine, or Mrs. Carewe, would remember and take them inside.

The police car was parked a short distance down the street beneath the shadow of trees. I walked down to it and peered into the right front window. Two young policemen, their faces illuminated by the dash light, were sitting there watching me. I said, "She's tucked in for the night, boys."

The one behind the wheel grinned. "Yeah, we know."

"No use hanging around. She won't skip."

The second one said, "We'd just as soon sit here — we're on duty until

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seven anyhow. Is that all right with you?"

I shrugged and walked away.

If a police cruiser followed me to the Deshler, I didn't spot it. The doorman said he'd take care of my car. I gave him fifty cents and took an elevator to my room in the tower. A down breeze blew in the window as I went to sleep.

CHAPTER NINE

I STRETCHED AND brought my wrist watch around in front of my eyes. A quarter after nine. I closed my eyes and tried to sleep again. But I couldn't, and at last I got up, shaved and showered, put on clean socks, underwear and shirt. I hadn't brought an extra suit, and the summer-weight cord I'd worn was badly wrinkled. I decided against having it pressed, and put it on, thinking that a press job wouldn't last long in the heat anyhow.

After breakfast I crossed the big lobby to the Broad Street exit. Already the sidewalks were crowded with people. The Capitol building loomed white against the hot blue sky. I discussed the heat with the doorman while waiting for my car. When it was brought around, I drove to the next block, turned left, passed the imposing façade of the state office building and caught a glimpse of the grim walls of the Ohio State Penitentiary beyond. Traffic was very heavy, and I drove for maybe fifteen minutes before I had a chance to swing up to High Street.

At the southern edge of the city I turned off and stopped beside the office of the Greerson Trucking Company. Jack Greerson's cream Buick was parked there. As I started to enter, Greerson came out. He stopped and stared at me in surprise. He was freshly shaven and was wearing a tan short-sleeved polo shirt and chocolate-brown slacks. His wide shoulders bulged beneath the tight shirt and his arms were muscular and tanned, covered with reddish hair.

"Good morning," I said, noting that his eyes were bloodshot, with a dark puffiness beneath them.

"I tried to get hold of you last night," he said. "Where in hell you been?"

"I've been busy. What did you want?"

He fingered a cigarette from a pack in his shirt pocket and flicked flame from a gold lighter. His hands trembled a little. Drawing on the cigarette, his gaze avoiding mine, he said, "She was gone again last night. I — I thought you might reconsider . . ."

"What time did she leave?"

"Around eight o'clock, right after dinner." He gazed at the morning

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haze above the city. "Said she was going to see a friend — Sue Andrews — about plans for a bridge party at the country club. She went to Sue's, all right — I followed her. But she left in twenty minutes and drove on downtown. I lost her in the traffic, but spotted her car parked on a side street close to the MacFarland Hotel. I waited a while, but she didn't show up. That's when I decided to call you — I figured you'd know how to handle it. I phoned the Deshler from a booth in the MacFarland, but the clerk said you were out. I got mad then, and went to a bar. I guess I had quite a few drinks. When I returned to where she'd left her car, it was gone. I drove home. She was there, in bed, asleep." His mouth twisted bitterly. "She was still asleep when I left this morning." He snapped the cigarette viciously across the blacktop. "You've got to do something, Bennett. I can't stand it any more."

I sighed. "All right. I'll think about it — if you're certain you want to go through with it. The picture has changed since yesterday, and I'll still make a deal with you. If you'll help persuade Francine to go home with me, I'll do what I can about your wife." I stopped, watching him.

His eyes were puzzled, and he frowned. "I don't get it. Fran is gone."

I shook my head. "I think she'll want her job back. She didn't go." I paused, and then added, "Johnny Wingate was murdered last night."

His eyes widened and he started as if I'd slapped him. "Murdered?"

I nodded, and told him quickly, all about it. When I'd finished, he ran a palm over his mouth. "My God, that's — terrible. Poor Fran."

"And poor Johnny," I said, and added carefully, "Did your wife know him?"

"How the hell would she know him?" he asked harshly.

I shrugged. "Francine told me that Wingate was in town recently. She may have introduced him to your wife."

"Fran and Evelyn are pretty good friends," he said thoughtfully. "She might have done that." He frowned. "But what difference does it make? What're you trying to say?"

"Nothing. I'm just trying to get the whole picture, and to give you the background. The police will no doubt question you, since Francine worked for you. They're watching her, and they've detained a singer in the band named Sally Valdez, and the arranger and pianist, a man named Delane. And they're probably watching me, since I was on the spot right after Wingate was killed."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Give Francine her job back, if she asks for it."

"That's easy. What else?"

"Tell the police the truth about her quitting to marry Wingate. I want our stories to jibe. That's all for now. Then, if she's cleared, I want you to seriously advise her to go home to her mother, if only for a short while. You

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said she would listen to you. I'll take it from there."

"Cleared?" he said blankly. "Do they think she murdered him?"

"Somebody did," I said. "I hope it wasn't Francine." I stopped. A police car glided over the blacktop and came to a stop beside my Mercury. Sergeant Corzetti got out and walked over to us, while a uniformed policeman stayed behind the wheel. Corzetti's lean hawk's face looked tired, but he was cleanly shaved and wore a spotless tan gabardine suit with a green-speckled bow tie knotted in the collar of a crisp white shirt. He pushed back a brown panama and said, "Good morning," to me in a grave voice.

"Good morning, Sergeant." I nodded at Jack Greerson. "This is Mr. Greerson. Francine Hopkins worked for him."

"So I understand," Corzetti said dryly. He shook hands with Greerson. "Could I speak with you a few moments?"

"Sure," Greerson said. "Sergeant, it was a shock to me — what happened last night. Mr. Bennett just told me."

Corzetti cocked an eyebrow at me and his thin black mustache twitched a little. "Mr. Bennett wastes no time," he said in the same dry voice.

"I've told you of my interest in Francine Hopkins," I said, feeling faint anger.

He nodded. "Quite true. Would you excuse us, please?"

I nodded and walked toward my car. Jack Greerson called after me, "You won't forget about — that other?"

"No. I'll see you later?"

As Corzetti and Greerson entered the building, the big youth named Lester Beck came out. There was a dull, stupid look on his pale, puffy face, but he grinned as Greerson said something to him. Then he lumbered away toward the garage. When he was half way there he stopped, turned and stared at me, a silent hulking figure in the hot sunlight. I raised a hand and wiggled some fingers, just to show him that I harbored no ill feeling because of our encounter the afternoon before. He made no answering sign, but just stared at me dully, his mouth half open. Then he turned and resumed his plodding course toward the garage.

I shivered a little in the sun, got into the Mercury and drove away.

From a phone book in a booth in the hotel lobby I got the address of The Friendly Finance and Loan Company. It was only four blocks away on a street crossing Broad. I walked there.

A huge sign in the window said, NEED MONEY? TRY OUR FRIENDLY SERVICE. NO RED TAPE, NO WAITING. CAR FINANCING OUR SPECIALTY. A smaller sign beside it informed the public that personal loans from $50.00 to $1000.00 could be arranged on signature. I went through a glass door into air conditioning so cool that I almost shivered. There was a tile floor, a row of wicketed brass windows and

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several desks in the rear behind low glass partitions. A man sat behind one of the desks, but he wasn't Glenn Malone. A youth in a tan work shirt was seated opposite the man, and they were conversing intently over a pile of legal-looking papers. Behind the first window a girl with yellow hair done in an exaggerated pony tail gave me an eager red-lipped smile. "Can I help you, sir?"

"Is Mr. Malone in?"

"Not right this second, sir," she said brightly. "He's at the court house recording chattels."

"Will he be back soon?"

"That's hard to say." She shot a worried glance at the man at the rear desk.

"I want to see Mr. Malone," I said firmly. "I'll wait."

I waited what seemed like hours before the front door opened and Glenn Malone entered.

This morning he was wearing a light weight pearl-gray suit, sharply creased, a blue silk necktie, and a black pork-pie panama with a wide gray band matching the pearl of his suit. Under one arm he carried a thin hand-tooled calfskin brief case. He looked at me as I stood up, and for a moment his blue eyes were puzzled. Then suddenly he smiled, snapped his fingers, and said, "I know you — Bennett, that's it." He opened his eyes and looked at me. "Right?"

I nodded.

"Fran introduced us last night."

"That's right. Have you talked with her since?"

Malone's eyes were puzzled. He shook his head. "No, but —"

"Look," I broke in. "How about a cup of coffee?"

He cast a dubious glance back at Mr. Calhoun and hesitated, indecision in his eyes. "I'm pretty busy this morning. What's it about?"

"It's about Francine," I said softly, "and it's private."

"Thelma, tell Cal I'll be back in a few minutes." Then he laughed and nodded at me. "Got a hot prospect here."

"All right, Glenn," she said sweetly.

He took my arm and I allowed him to lead me outside, but not before I saw Mr. Calhoun raise his head and stare coldly at us. Malone led me into a small drug store next door. There was a lunch counter and four booths crammed between shelves of cosmetics and wire racks loaded with magazines and paperback reprints. We sat at the counter. Malone ordered coffee for both of us, and put cream and sugar in his. I drink mine black. He stirred and said, "What's this about Fran?"

"I just thought you'd like to know that she's not going to marry Johnny Wingate."

He stopped stirring and looked at me sideways. "Who are you, anyhow?"

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He paused, and added, "Another lawyer?"

I ignored the questions and asked one of my own. "Then Francine told you about her mother wanting her to come home?"

He nodded. "Yes. I advised her she'd better do it. But —" He turned on the stool to face me. "What is this? Who's Johnny Wingate?"

I was surprised. "Didn't she tell you?"

"No, not his name. . . . So that's the guy she's going to marry?"

"Was," I said. "He's dead now."

Carefully he placed his cup in the saucer. "Now, wait a minute. I don't get this. You said —"

"I said he was dead — the man Francine was going to marry. So you didn't know his name?"

He shook his head, leaned forward and lifted the cup. A little coffee spilled to the saucer. "I asked her who he was, of course, but she wouldn't tell me. She just said he was a — an old sweetheart, that she'd been in love with him for a long time. We had a hell of an argument . . ."

"I guessed that," I said. "I was parked across the street and saw you leave in kind of a huff."

He turned back and sipped his coffee. "I thought I had the inside track with Fran," he said gloomily. "Then a couple of weeks ago she began to change — forgot dates I had with her and seemed, well, to always be thinking of something else. Last night I learned the reason; she told me she had quit her job and was getting married, that she wouldn't see me any more." He paused, sighed, and added, "Oh, she said she was sorry and all that crap, but it was a hell of a shock." He pushed his cup and saucer away. "What happened? Did they have an accident? Is that how he died?"

"Francine's all right. It wasn't an auto accident, or any kind of accident. Wingate was murdered."

He stared blankly. "Murdered?"

"Yes. He had a dance band. You've no doubt heard of him."

"That Wingate?" He took an immaculate white linen handkerchief from his breast pocket, carefully unfolded it and wiped his face. "Did Fran know him?"

"She loved him, I guess. Maybe you don't read the papers. His band played here last night, at a place called Rainbow Terrace."

"I've been there," he said. "Out on the river road."

"That's right. Francine was to meet him there, and get married in New York. Somebody shot him first. Does that make you happy?"

He ignored my last remark, seemed not to have heard it. "Where's Fran now?"

"I took her back to Mrs. Carewe's last night."

He stood up abruptly. "I'm going to her. She needs me now. She —" He stopped and peered down at me. "Who killed Wingate? And why?"

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I shrugged. "The police are working on it."

"How did it happen?"

I told him quickly.

He took a deep breath. "My God, that's — terrible. Poor Fran."

I stood, too, thinking wearily that he'd used the exact words Jack Greerson had used. I said, "I just thought I'd tip you off. The police may question you."

"Thanks," he said quietly. "I suppose that now you think you can talk Fran into going home?"

"I hoped you would see it that way."

"I'm on your side," he said seriously and moved to the door. "I'll see you later, and let you know how I make out with Fran."

"Do that. I'm staying at the Deshler. Where can I reach you?"

He paused in surprise. "Why, at the office."

"I might want to talk to you after office hours."

He gazed at me a moment, and then said, "I room out close to the campus, just off High." He gave me a street and number and added, "But I'm not there very much — except to change clothes and sleep. Aubrey Donlin — he owns the house — will take any messages, if he's at home."

"Thanks. You never know what might come up."

CHAPTER TEN

It was now a quarter of eleven in the morning. I walked in the heat to my car and drove out High Street toward the University. I found the house where Glenn Malone roomed and stopped at the curb behind an ancient Chevrolet with a red-and-gray Ohio State pennant dangling from the radio mast. Two youths in sneakers, blue jeans and white T-shirts sat on the porch steps smoking cigarettes. The house was of tan stucco with a cement front porch. The youths eyed me silently as I came up the walk and stopped before them. They nodded and I nodded and I went up the steps past them to the porch. There wasn't any bell, and as I rapped on the screen door one of the youths behind me said, "Aubrey is gone, Mister."

"I really wanted to see Glenn Malone. He stays here, I understand. Is he home?"

"Nope. He's working."

"Where's Glenn's room? I'll just leave a note under his door." I took an old envelope from my coat pocket, unscrewed my fountain pen and wrote, *Now is the time for all good men.*

"Right in front," the youth nearest me said, nodding at an upper window.

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"Head of the hall."

"Thanks." I found the room and stepped inside.

The one window was closed and the room was stifling. It was just a room, rather small, containing a brass bed, unmade, a straight wooden chair, a sagging arm chair covered with soiled brocade, a floor lamp with a parchment shade, a cherry dresser with a marble top. Beside the dresser a closet door stood open revealing an impressive array of clothing.

I moved back to the dresser. The marble top was clear. I opened the top drawer. It was filled with a rainbow mass of neckties. The second drawer contained crisp folded shirts still sealed in laundry bands. The third drawer held socks, underwear, handkerchiefs and an open leather tray filled with silver and gold cuff links and tie clasps. The fourth and bottom drawer was stuffed with papers and envelopes. Most of the papers were statements from clothing stores and haberdasheries, and many of them were stamped *Past Due — Please Remit.* A checkbook lay on top of the papers. I opened it, saw that the last stub was for two hundred dollars, dated three days before, and made out to someone named Matthew Prosser. If the previous balance was correct, Glenn Malone was now overdrawn. Or the check had bounced.

I closed the drawer and gazed about the room. On a low stand beside the bed a cheap alarm clock made a loud ticking sound. I leaned closer, saw that the alarm hand was set for seven o'clock. Beside the clock was a glass ash tray filled with ashes and cigarette stubs. None of the stubs bore lipstick stains. In fact, nothing in the room hinted at female occupancy; apparently Glenn Malone's room was strictly a bachelor's den. I looked again at the alarm clock. The time it showed checked with my wrist watch — twenty minutes until twelve noon. I went out, locked the door, and went back down to the front porch.

The two college boys were gone, and so was the ancient Chevrolet. As I went down the steps, a fat man came limping up the walk leaning on a cane. His puffy face was mottled and red-blotched, and his eyes were gray, large and watery. He was maybe sixty, but he looked eighty, and the fat hung on him in unwholesome folds, bulging the waist of his soiled and sweaty white shirt. He wore limp rust-tinted rayon slacks and beach sandals, no socks. His bare feet were worm-white and the nails needed cleaning and cutting. He stopped and peered at me, working his sunken lips. "Looking for somebody?" he asked. The sour beer smell was very strong in the hot air.

"I wanted to see Glenn Malone," I said. "I knocked on his door, but I guess he's out."

"How'd you know which was Glenn's room?" he asked suspiciously.

"A couple of boys told me."

He nodded. "Louis and Gregory. Good boys. They got the back room. Their folks paid their rent for the summer."

"That's nice," I said. "What time does Glenn usually come home?"

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He spat on the sidewalk and worked his concave lips. "Never know. All hours at night. Of course, he's working now."

"Where does he work?" I asked innocently.

He waved an arm. "Oh, some finance outfit down town. Can't tell you the name."

I hesitated. Then I asked, "Was Glenn at home last night?"

He nodded briskly. "Yep. Came in around eleven and sat on the porch with me a spell. Asked me to call him at seven this morning — on account of his alarm clock was busted. Glenn's a pretty good boy, sociable and all, but he's behind in his rent. He — say, are you a bill collector?"

I just smiled at him.

"Thought so," he said shortly, and spat again. "Glenn has a lot of 'em coming here. He lives too high for his income." He blinked at me in the sun and said wistfully, "Maybe you'd like to have a cold beer with a lonely old man?"

"Thanks, but I can't right now. Are you sure it was eleven when Glenn came home last night?"

His watery old eyes blinked in the sun. "Around there," he said vaguely. "Ten-thirty, eleven. Time don't mean much to me."

"And you called him at seven this morning?"

"Yep. I'm always up early. Went up and pounded on his door. He hollered 'Thanks', and around seven-thirty I heard him come down the stairs and I saw him drive away. He parks on the street, because I ain't got no garage. Never owned a car, you see."

"Was he in his room all night? I mean, did he leave after he came home?"

He lifted his heavy shoulders. "Not that I know of. What difference does it make?" He squinted at me. "Is something wrong?"

"I hope not," I said. "Thanks." As I moved away, he turned to stare at me, leaning on his cane, his sunken lips making nervous chewing motions. I waved to him as I drove away, and he lifted his cane absently.

As I swung out onto High Street, I had an uneasy sneaking feeling, and wondered if Glenn Malone's alarm clock really was broken. It had been ticking normally and the time had been correct. Perhaps it was only the alarm mechanism that was out of order. For a moment I was tempted to turn back and check the clock, but decided against it. All I wanted was to clear Francine Hopkins of suspicion of murder and take her to her mother's bedside, and returning to the house now might involve undesirable complications with the beer-drinking landlord.

It was twelve o'clock noon. I was hungry, but decided to postpone lunch until I'd talked to Sally Valdez.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

AT THE MACFARLAND HOTEL a bored and aging clerk wearing a blond crew-cut toupee told me the room number and languidly indicated a house phone on the end of the desk. She didn't answer right away, and when she did her voice was sullen. "Yes?"

"Miss Valdez?" I asked brightly.

"Who is this?" she asked suspiciously.

"My name is Bennett. I met you last night at Rainbow Terrace, and —"

"I remember," she cut in coldly. "A lawyer, or something. What do you want?"

"Could I see you for a few minutes?"

"What about?"

"About Johnny."

"All right," she sighed. "Come on up."

I went up.

She was wearing a silk mint-green robe which contrasted nicely with her hazel eyes and silver-blonde hair, and which also hung open revealing thin ivory-colored pajamas. Her feet were bare, and the toenails were lacquered bright red. She wore lipstick, but no other makeup, and in the noon sunlight shining in the open window her small oval face looked pale and drawn. She motioned wearily to a chair and didn't speak.

I sat down beside a small desk, holding my panama on my knees. The room was in disorder. Bed sheets trailed to the floor and articles of female attire were scattered about. Directly opposite me the bathroom door stood open. Soggy towels were lying on the floor beside the tub. Beyond the end of the tub was a closed door, and from behind it I heard muffled voices.

I said, "So the police were here this morning?"

She lit a cigarette and nodded sullenly. "Questions, questions. You'd think from the way they acted that I shot Johnny." Her red mouth quivered. "I — I loved him . . ." She turned away and gazed out the window. With the sun shining through the thin robe and pajamas, her small slim body was perfectly silhouetted, a pleasing sight.

The voices from the room beyond the bathroom grew louder. I said, "You have noisy neighbors."

"That was Johnny's room," she said in a dull voice. "The police are there now." She changed the subject. "Have a drink."

I hesitated.

"There's another glass in the bathroom," she said impatiently, and turned to face me. "My God — what're you so coy about?"

I grinned at her. "I guess it's just because I'm not accustomed to drinking Scotch in a lady's bedroom at noon."

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"Thanks," she said bitterly. "I guess you've figured out by now that I was sleeping with Johnny?" She drank from the glass.

"Yes," I said gently.

She cradled the glass in her fingers and gazed at me with a disturbing directness. "I know what Johnny was," she said evenly, "but I didn't care. He even told me about that girl — Francine? — but I thought I could change his mind. I tried, but it didn't work. He told me last night he was going to take her to New York and marry her there. We had an argument, and —" She broke off, and then added in a brittle voice, "Why am I bothering? I told it all to the cops. What do you want, anyhow?"

"Did you kill Johnny?"

Hate blazed in her eyes, and contempt. "To hell with you." She bit off the words, drank again, and the ice clinked in the bottom of her glass.

"Can I still have that drink?" I asked.

She lifted round shoulders beneath the thin robe. "Go ahead — but Skippy won't like it if he finds you here. He has a mean temper." There was a chill glitter in her hazel eyes.

"Skippy Delane?" I raised my eyebrows. "Last night I got the definite impression that you and Skippy didn't care for each other."

"We don't," she said sullenly, avoiding my gaze. "I asked him to come and see me. He's a no-good, but still one of the hottest arrangers in the country. I thought that maybe between us we could keep Johnny's band together."

"A sort of truce?"

"You can call it that. I'm willing to try and work with Skippy — if we get clear of this mess about Johnny."

"Skippy was jealous of Johnny, wasn't he?"

She nodded and held out her empty glass. "Please?"

I grinned at her, refilled her glass, made a short drink for myself. She sat on the edge of the bed facing me, holding the glass with both hands, and leaning forward. The top of the jacket was unbuttoned, revealing more than half of one small round breast. I couldn't help but look, and she made no move to button the jacket. She shivered a little, holding the glass between her knees, and said softly, "She killed Johnny. I know she did. She was jealous, because of me, and . . ." She paused and her eyes grew bright. "And maybe Johnny told her that he loved me, that he couldn't marry her — and she killed him."

"Maybe. But Johnny must have gotten some word, some message, to go outside when he did. Did anyone come up to him, speak to him, just before it happened?"

She sighed and drank. Then she looked at me directly and said in a cold even voice, "A lot of people came up and spoke to him, asked for his autograph, wanted request numbers — stuff like that."

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"Naturally," I said patiently. "I mean was there anything special? Just before he left?"

"I might remember," she said, twisting sideways on the bed and gazing at the wall. She had an attractive profile, and she knew it, and she also knew that the pajama top was gaping more than before. "I might remember, if I thought real hard . . ." She placed a finger on her lips and frowned in mock concentration. "I'm kind of mixed up, and worried. For one thing, I really don't know how I'm going to pay my hotel bill."

"Broke?" I drank a little more of the Scotch, watching her.

She nodded ruefully. "Very. Johnny always paid us on Friday, and this is Thursday, and that policeman told me this morning that Johnny's money will be tied up for a while . . ." She lifted her shoulders helplessly and sighed.

I sighed, too, and said, "Maybe I could help you out until things are cleared up — a loan, of course — and maybe with that worry out of the way you could remember a little better."

She looked at me and said soberly, "I'm certain I could, but, really, I wasn't hinting . . ."

I put my glass beside hers on the desk, placed my hands on her shoulders and pulled her against me. Her body pressed softly and her hips moved very subtly as she bent back and raised her face, her eyes closed, her lips parted. I kissed her, because it seemed indicated, and her lips were warm and professional and it was all rather nice. Presently she pushed gently away from me and murmured against my shirt front, "I — I needed that. I've felt so alone, so afraid . . ." She sighed deeply, snuggled her cheek against me, and her fingers dug gently into my shoulders.

Slowly I pushed her away and she smiled up at me, a sleepy child's smile, and one finger plucked at a button of my shirt. "What's your first name?"

"Jim."

I took out my wallet. "How much do you need, Sally?"

She fluttered her hands. "Must we talk about money?"

I shrugged. "Not if you don't want to. I just thought it would relieve your mind and might help you to remember if anyone in particular came up and spoke to Johnny last night, just before he left the building. If you'll tell how much. . . ."

"A hundred would help," she said, and added hastily, "but I didn't mean for you to. . . ." Her voice trailed off and she lowered her head. "I hardly know you," she said in a small voice.

"Fifty is all I can spare right now. Maybe it will help, though." As I spoke, I told myself not to forget to put the fifty on my expense account to Mrs. Hopkins.

Sally Valdez raised her head, smiling like a kid with a new doll, raised on tiptoes, threw her arms around me and kissed me warmly. Very warmly.

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And she held the kiss, pressing her slim body against me. It was very nice and almost worth the fifty dollars. Almost, but not quite. Gently I released her arms and pushed her away a little. "Do you remember now?"

She wrinkled her small nose and then stuck out her plump lower lip, pretending to pout. "Is that all you can think about? What I remember?"

"I'm afraid so — right now, anyhow. And Skippy will be here any second. Tell me what you remember now, and maybe we can get together later."

"Is that a promise?"

"Sure."

"Good." Her eyes were mocking again. "I'll tell you what I remember then."

I grasped her wrist just above the hand clutching the money. I put on the pressure with my fingers and smiled down at her. "You'll tell me now, honey."

Her lips compressed and her eyes went suddenly ugly and cold as she struggled to twist her wrist free. I held on.

"All right," she panted. "You win. Let me go." With her free hand she brushed the bright hair back from her face.

There was a knock on the door.

She heard it and cried out, "Skippy! Come on in!"

I jumped to the door and turned the catch lock. The knob started to turn back and forth and a muffled voice said, "Damn it, I can't — it's locked."

I said in a low voice, "Tell him to wait a minute."

"Just a minute, Skippy. I forgot I didn't have any clothes on."

The voice outside mumbled something, and the knob stopped turning.

I hesitated a moment, and then released Sally Valdez's wrist. Slowly she turned to face me, rubbing her wrist. The hate died in her eyes and she summoned a twisted smile. "You didn't let me get away with it, did you?"

"You shouldn't have tried," I said reproachfully. "I'm sorry if I hurt you." I nodded at the door. "He'll be getting impatient. Hurry and tell me."

She glanced at the door, her red mouth twisted in distaste, and said, "Just before Johnny left last night a young kid came up and spoke to him. I didn't know him — he was just a jerk at the dance."

"What did he look like?" Both of us kept our voices low.

She moved her shoulders. "Like they all do, I guess, except he didn't have a crew cut. His hair was long and wavy, real blond."

"Anything else?"

"He wore glasses, with thick rims, sort of — of studious. And he wore a white dinner jacket with a narrow maroon bow tie."

"Dinner jacket? Isn't that a little unusual for Rainbow Terrace?"

"I wouldn't know. They tell me this is a college town. Anyhow, that's

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what he had on."

"Is that all you can tell me?"

She gave me a small wicked smile. "That's all, darling. He just came up and spoke to Johnny, and then Johnny told me he was going out for a smoke and left."

I sighed. It was a small return for fifty dollars. I nodded toward the bathroom. "Is that connecting door locked?"

"If it is, I have a key. I'll get it." She turned, moved to the dresser, and then entered the bathroom. She tried the door. It was locked, as I had suspected. She opened it and smiled at me over her shoulder. As I moved past her into the adjoining room, she said, "Thanks for the fifty bucks."

"You're welcome. I'll see you latter." She was already moving away. I closed the door and stood listening.

Delane said something I didn't catch. I turned away from the door and moved to the center of the room which had been briefly occupied by Johnny Wingate, deceased. I crossed to the door, released the spring lock and stepped into the corridor.

Sergeant Corzetti was waiting for me.

CHAPTER TWELVE

I CLOSED THE DOOR and grinned at him. "Hello, Sergeant."

His thin nostrils flared a little as he sniffed at the air. "You've been drinking, Bennett."

"Just one, with a lady." I nodded at the door behind me. "How'd you know I was in there?"

He regarded me thoughtfully, rubbing his thin nose with a brown forefinger. Then he said, "I didn't. You were supposed to be next door, in the lady's room."

"I ducked across through the bathroom. The lady had a key."

"I see. You wished to avoid the lady's other visitor? The musician?"

I nodded. "She wishes to form an alliance — to hold the band together."

He smiled faintly. "An unholy alliance. They seemed to be bitter enemies last night."

I looked down the hall and saw a tall man in a brown suit leaning against the wall by the elevator. I nodded at him and said to Corzetti, "Is he my tail?"

"Sort of."

"There's no need to waste a man on me."

"Maybe not," he said shortly. "Routine."

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I lifted an eyebrow. "No arrest yet?"

He shook his head impatiently. "No. Not enough to go on. All circumstantial, and skimpy at that. I think the Hopkins girl killed Wingate. She had the motive, and the opportunity, but we can't prove it. Hell, we haven't even found the gun." He regarded me with narrowed eyes. "What were you doing in Glenn Malone's room?"

"You know about him? The rejected suitor?"

He nodded. "Of course. I talked to him a while ago. He showed up at the house where the Hopkins girl stays. He seems okay, and apparently has an alibi for last night, but I'll admit he may have had a motive for killing Wingate."

"Go on," Corzetti snapped. "Who else?"

I grinned at him. "There's me, Sarge. Francine's mother promised me a nice bonus to bring Francine to her bedside. But Wingate was going to whisk her away to New York and marry her. So I sneaked out to Rainbow Terrace ahead of Francine, called Wingate outside and blasted him — so Francine could be free to go home with me." I held out my arms, the wrists together. "Take me in, officer."

He looked pained. "How many drinks did you say you had?" He swung away and strode down the corridor. I followed him, pausing a moment at Sally Valdez's door. There wasn't a sound from inside the room. I joined Corzetti and the tall man in the brown suit. The latter had a round pleasant face and keen blue eyes behind rimless glasses. He looked more like a banker than a detective. Corzetti jerked his head at me and said to the tall man, "Forget him, Dan — until I tell you different."

Dan nodded and grinned at me.

"Thanks, Sergeant," I murmured.

"But keep in touch with me," Corzetti warned. "And don't hold anything out."

"Yes, Sergeant."

Corzetti and I went down in the elevator.

"Who's Matthew Prosser?" I asked him.

He eyed me. Then: "Why?"

"I snooped in Glenn Malone's room. Malone gave Prosser a check for two hundred bucks. According to his check stub balance, his account can't stand it. The check bounced, or else Malone is overdrawn. I don't know how chummy he is with his banker."

"It bounced," Corzetti said. "We checked the bank." He smiled grimly. "We went through Malone's room, too."

"Mr. Prosser is probably irritated, then?"

"No doubt," Corzetti said shortly. "I'd like to irritate him more. He's a gambler, and plays the fringes of the rackets. No convictions yet, but I'll get him."

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"Young Malone doesn't keep very nice company."

"Malone isn't the only one," Corzetti said darkly. "Some very solid Columbus citizens owe Prosser money."

"But he isn't Malone's only creditor," I said. "That boy is head over heels in debt."

He gave me a crooked grin. "Aren't we all?"

"Maybe, but it gives Malone a double motive for wanting Wingate dead. Not only was he jealous of Wingate, but if he married Francine, and then persuaded her to go home to her mother, he could get his hands on the Hopkins estate. I think money would solve most of Glenn Malone's problems. Have you thought of that?"

"No, frankly I have not. I'll bear it in mind." He gave me a tight-lipped grin. "Thanks, Bennett."

"You're welcome." I went out to the street feeling righteous and law-abiding, and only slightly guilty about not telling Corzetti about Jack Greerson. It always paid to have the law on your side, and already it seemed to be paying off. Corzetti now trusted me enough to stop having me followed — or else he pretended to trust me enough. I told myself not to sell Sergeant Corzetti short.

I returned to the Deshler after lunch. The huge lobby was dusky and cool. I stopped at the desk and the clerk gave me a message which stated that a Mr. Greerson had called and that I was to call him as soon as I returned. I took an elevator up to my room in the tower.

My room high above the city seemed very quiet and remote from the world. I moved to the window and finished my cigarette. Thunder rolled faintly far away and I wished that it would rain and maybe get cooler. Presently I entered the bathroom, washed my face in cold water and decided against changing my shirt. A fresh one would be limp in twenty minutes, and I had only brought three with me. I called Greerson and he told me about Fran and invited me to dinner. Then I placed a call to my office in Cleveland.

Sandy Hollis answered. "Hi, Jim! When they said it was Columbus, I knew it was you. How're you making out?"

"Terrible." It was nice to hear Sandy's voice. "Have you had any word from Mrs. Hopkins?"

"Not directly, Jim, but her nurse called . . ." She paused.

"Yes?" I prompted her, remembering the plump and attractive Miss Stanton.

"She said Mrs. Hopkins had a bad spell during the night — almost died, I guess." I heard Sandy sigh. "Mrs. Hopkins wanted to know if there was any news about her daughter."

"There's news," I said, "but I don't think we'd better tell her."

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"Jim, she might die — any minute. Miss Stanton was quite frank about it. She had talked to the lawyers, and they said that if Mrs. Hopkins daughter doesn't come home soon — before she dies, I mean — the estate will go to charity, all of it. She says that Mrs. Hopkins is willing to accept her daughter on any terms, just so she comes home. Jim . . ." Sandy paused, and I sensed the distress in her voice.

"What's the matter?" I asked sharply.

"It — it's sad, Jim. Miss Stanton said that Mrs. Hopkins will forgive Francine for everything, and leave her all the family money, no matter what Francine has done, if she'll come to her before she dies. Miss Stanton was very clear on that. *Can't* you get her to come up here right away?"

"I don't know. Right now she's under suspicion of murder."

"Oh, my," Sandy said faintly.

"I'll keep on it. Everything else under control?"

"Yes. But remember if Mrs. Hopkins dies before you bring Francine home . . ."

"I'll remember," I said grimly. "Keep me posted, Sandy."

Mrs. Carewe, sallow and limp and damp, appeared behind the screen door. "Oh, hello," she said listlessly. "I suppose you want to see Francine?"

"Yes," I said, but I knew that Francine wasn't there; I hadn't spotted a police car, nor any loitering detectives. She was Sergeant Corzetti's prime suspect, and I knew he would take no chances.

"She went away with Mr. Malone," Mrs. Carewe said tiredly, "oh, around noon. The police were here before talking to the poor girl. She told me about the terrible thing that happened last night . . ." She peered up and down the street. "I've been waiting for the paper to read about it. It's a shame and a —"

"Do you know where they went?"

She fished beneath the neckline of her dress and tugged at a brassiere strap. "No, she didn't say. They just got into Mr. Malone's car and drove away."

"Thanks. When she returns, would you ask her to call me at the Deshler? It's important. My name is Bennett."

"I'll tell her. Hasn't this heat been terrible?"

"Terrible," I agreed. "Maybe we'll get some rain." I tipped my hat and went down the porch steps.

Less than a block away I began to really worry. I wanted to get Francine home before her mother died, but where was she? I called police headquarters and asked for Sergeant Corzetti. There was a short delay, and then his crisp voice said, "Corzetti speaking."

"This is Bennett, Sergeant."

"Yes?" His voice was guarded.

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"I need a favor."

"Well," he said, "that's a twist. I always thought that private detectives, with their superior intelligence, usually peform favors for the police."

"Please, Sergeant. This is urgent. My office called. Francine Hopkins' mother is dying. Would you consider releasing her in my custody to take her to her mother's bedside?"

He didn't answer for a second. Then he said, "You want to take her to Cleveland now? This afternoon?"

"If possible."

"Will she consent to go with you?"

"I don't know. I can try. After all, it's her mother . . ."

He said, "I hesitate to mention the fee your agency might lose if Mrs. Hopkins dies before you return the daughter, but I am certain it has not entered your thoughts."

"Not once," I said firmly.

He laughed, a trifle hollowly, I thought, and said, "You have my permission, Bennett, but I will hold you responsible. We have nothing but circumstantial evidence against Miss Hopkins, but she is still under surveillance."

"I know. Where is she now?"

"Don't you know?" He sounded surprised.

"She went away with Glenn Malone. I don't know where. I'll have to make radio contact," he said wearily. "Hang on."

I had time to light a cigarette and take three drags before he came back on the line. "They're just driving around," he said. "Right now they're in the Arlington section headed for Grandview."

"Could you radio your men to stop Malone and hold them until I get there?"

"I'm afraid not, Bennett," he said crisply. "They don't know they're being followed, and I want to keep it that way. If you can catch her on your own, that's up to you."

I sighed, and hung up.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I HAD A GLASS OF GINGER ALE at the drug store counter, returned to my car and drove through the thickening traffic of late afternoon to the Deshler-Hilton and stopped by the Broad Street entrance. The doorman promised to take care of my car and gave me a ticket. I tipped him and went inside. I could have hunted a parking space, but time was running out.

There was a message for me at the desk. It was from Sandy Hollis and had

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been telephoned thirty minutes earlier. I read the typed words. *Mrs. Hopkins very critical. Not expected to live more than a few hours. Doctors say she may last longer if Francine shows up. Lawyers say estate goes irrevocably to charity if Francine does not arrive before death. Sandy.*

I crumped the message, tossed it into a sand-filled urn, and went to the elevators. When I reached my room I looked in the phone book and called Mrs. Carewe. Her tired voice told me that Francine had not returned. I called the police station. Sergeant Corzetti was out. I asked the cop on the phone if he could contact the officers who were following Miss Hopkins, a suspect in the murder of a man named Wingate. He said he would have to check with the captain. I waited. Presently the cop told me that the captain wanted to know who was calling. I told him. There was another wait. Then the cop said, "I'm sorry for the delay, Mr. Bennett. Sergeant Corzetti left instructions to give you every possible assistance. I — uh — just came on duty. I will contact car 28 and report to you. Please stand by."

I stood by. In maybe three minutes the voice said, "The suspect and companion are now driving on Cleveland Avenue, near the fair grounds."

"Can you stop them? Just long enough for me to —"

"I'm sorry," he broke in. "Sergeant Corzetti also left orders that —"

"All right," I said wearily. "Thanks." I hung up and looked at my wrist watch. Four-thirty. It would take me at least twenty minutes to drive out to the fair grounds, and when I got there Francine and Glenn Malone would no doubt be the hell and gone. I would never find them.

Once more I called Mrs. Carewe. I told her that I would be at the hotel until five-thirty. After that Francine was to call me at Jack Greerson's home. I consulted the book again and gave her the number. She agreed in a tired voice to do as I asked. I thanked her, told her again that it was urgent, an emergency. Then I undressed, shaved, showered and put on a clean shirt, socks and underwear. As I dressed, I had a short drink of bourbon mixed with cold water from the bathroom tap.

At five-thirty I was going out the door. The ringing of the phone stopped me. I hurried back into the room, picked up the phone. "Yes?" I said expectantly.

"Mr. Bennett?" It was a female voice, but not Francine's.

"Yes."

"This is Sally Valdez. Remember me?"

"Of course." I hesitated, gulping on my disappointment, and said, "Is it all set for you and Skippy Delane to carry on the band?"

"No," she said shortly. "I have some information for you — if you want it."

"What kind of information?"

"I'd rather not say on the phone. Can I see you?"

"I have an appointment, but maybe I can spare a few minutes. Where

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are you?"

"Down in the lobby. Shall I come up?" There was a suggestive huskiness to her voice.

"No," I said firmly. "I'll be right down."

She laughed softly. "All right. You can buy me a quick drink." The phone clicked in my ear.

I stood in the silent room and gazed about, feeling an odd sense of uneasy awareness, not because of Sally Valdez's call, but because of the whole pattern of events since I'd arrived in Columbus. My glance fell on my battered pigskin bag which lay open on a stand against the wall. I went to it, felt beneath my clean shirt and lifted out the gun I'd brought along from force of habit, the one I usually carried, a Smith and Wesson .38 revolver. I hefted it thoughtfully for a moment, and then dropped its muzzle down into the inside pocket of my coat. It made the light garment sag a little, but the weight was comforting and familiar, even though I was merely going to see Sally Valdez briefly and then proceed to Jack Greerson's house for dinner. But I suddenly knew, without any logical reason and in spite of my previous thoughts on the subject, that Johnny Wingate's killer was not a fleeing stranger, and that he, or she, was still here in Columbus. And I had identified myself to a number of people as a man on the hunt for the killer, whoever he was. Or she. So I took the gun.

Sally Valdez was waiting for me by the newsstand near the High Street entrance.

"Your room would have been nicer," she said reproachfully.

"Yes," I agreed, "if I wasn't in a hurry." I glanced around. There was no one near us. "What's the information?"

"Aren't you going to buy me a drink?"

I shook my head. "Sorry. No time."

She smiled sweetly, but her hazel eyes hardened a little. "No drink, no information."

I shrugged and turned away.

She spoke in a low, intense voice. "Damn you, listen."

I kept going toward the street entrance. I was a little weary of Sally Valdez and her tactics.

She caught me on the sidewalk and we stood facing each other, making a little eddy in the river of moving people. Her lips were very red against the sudden pallor of her face and her eyes were narrowed behind the blonde lashes. "To hell with you," she said bitterly. "I'll tell the police."

I shrugged again. "Tell them." A few persons passing by gave us curious glances.

"Who the hell do you think you are?" she said shrilly. More people glanced at us.

Suddenly I took her arm firmly, led her around the corner to the Broad

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Street entrance, and handed the doorman my car receipt. Then I pushed Sally Valdez against the wall of the hotel. "Now, listen," I said to her in a low voice. "I'm sick of this. If you have anything to tell me, let's have it. Now."

There was hate in her eyes, but she managed to smile. "I'm sorry," she said. "I guess I just felt bitchy. It — it's about Johnny."

"What about him?"

Her gaze wavered downward and she fingered the black purse. In the filtered afternoon sunlight her skin had a warm ivory look and there were tiny pin-points of perspiration on her upper lip. The green dress fitted her slender figure very snugly, and the low neckline added to the alluring picture. She stopped fingering the purse, and held her elbows, as if she were cold. The gesture made the dress gap in front, as she intended. It was so obvious that I almost laughed, and yet I could not deny that Sally Valdez had very evident charms, in addition to her singing voice. She spoke in a low, hesitant voice. "I — I know who killed him."

I said, "All right, Sally — who?"

She looked up at me. There was a slyness in her eyes. "How much is it worth to you?"

"I gave you fifty dollars."

"I need more."

"I'm sorry," I said to Sally Valdez. "I'm waiting."

Her mouth twisted. "Skippy killed Johnny. He was jealous of Johnny, and wanted to take over the band for himself, to be a big name again. He lied to the police. He left the band and went outside, before Johnny went out."

"Before the kid with the glasses and white dinner jacket came up to Johnny and spoke to him?"

"Yes. Johnny went out, and Skippy followed him. Skippy had set it up with the kid, paid him, no doubt."

"Do you have any proof?"

Her eyes wavered, and she fingered the purse nervously. "Skippy has a gun. I — I saw it in his room one time. And he hated Johnny . . ."

I said, "So Skippy turned you down this afternoon, refused to cut you in on Johnny's band. Is that it?"

"All right," she said in a harsh ugly voice. "He turned me down, but —"

"You're just trying to get even," I cut in, "trying to frame Skippy for Johnny's murder. It was a charming attempt, but I don't buy it."

Her eyes blazed. "The police will buy it!"

"Be sure and give them the whole story, honey. Thanks for nothing. And goodbye."

I left her standing there.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

JACK GREERSON LIVED in a pleasant wooded section off High Street close to the southern city limits and not far from his place of business. I parked my Mercury at the curb and walked up a blacktop drive which circled around to a double garage where a red Ford Thunderbird was parked. I didn't see Jack Greerson's cream-colored Buick. I went up three cement steps to a small stoop with graceful wrought iron railings. The door was painted red and bore a brass knocker. I lifted the knocker, let it fall and waited. In a minute the door opened and a woman stood looking out at me.

She was tall and slender with bronze hair done high on her head in a kind of ubangi top-knot. Her eyes were brown and wide-set and her skin was a milky white with a few tiny golden freckles which went well with her hair. She had a short straight nose with delicate nostrils, and her mouth was full and red and well shaped. She wore a plain black linen dress, sleeveless and low-necked, snug at the waist and flaring out with a ballet effect. Her long legs were slim and bare and smoothly shaven, and she wore flat black slippers.

I said, "Mrs. Greerson?"

She nodded, her neat bronze brows coming together in a faint frown.

"My name's Bennett, and it seems that I'm a dinner guest."

She smiled. "Oh, of course. Jack called me and I guess I expected you to come with him." She peered out at the drive. "I wonder what's keeping him." Her voice was soft and pleasant, and she spoke each word distinctly. She stepped aside. "Please come in."

She said, "I never heard Jack mention you, Mr. Bennett. Are you in the trucking business, too?"

I thought fast. Then I said carefully, "Not exactly. I'm traffic manager for a — a brewing company. We expect to build a plant here, and it's my job to line up shipping facilities to our southern distributors." I smiled at her. "It looks like the Greerson Trucking Company will get our business."

"That's wonderful," she said, laughing. "I must remember to be especially nice to you." She took my coat and offered me a martini. "What firm are you with?"

I had been feeling pleased with my glibness, but now I had to think fast once more. I said, "The Duke Brewing Company."

"I'm afraid I never heard of Duke beer," Mrs. Greerson said.

"You will," I replied, smiling. "It's very popular in the east and north. When the plant is built, we hope to make it popular here."

"I'm sure it will be," she said politely, "although I seldom drink beer. Too many calories, and when I married Jack he made me promise that I would never get fat."

"You don't have to worry," I said.

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"Thank you, sir." She nodded her head in mock acknowledgement of my compliment.

I heard a car come up the drive and turned my head. Jack Greerson's Buick braked to a stop. There were two persons beside him in the front seat. Mrs. Greerson stood up. "Oh, there's Jack now. Excuse me." She went through the French doors.

I stood up, too, carried my drink to the edge of the terrace and gazed out over the terrace. I heard voices in the living room behind me, and Jack Greerson said, "Sorry to be late, honey."

I finished my drink and turned to place the glass on the low table. As I did so, Francine Hopkins stepped out to the terrace. When she saw me, her eyes went wide in surprise.

"Francine," I said quickly, "I've been trying to locate you. Your —"

Glenn Malone appeared behind her and placed an arm about her waist. "Well, well," he said, smiling at me, "it's a small world." His blue eyes were very bright and he looked happy. I wondered if his aimless driving with Francine during the afternoon had resulted in her promise to marry him. Malone still wore the light pearl-gray suit he'd had on in the morning when I'd met him at his place of employment, the Friendly Finance and Loan Company.

I nodded at him. Jack Greerson came out on the terrace, followed by his wife. He said, "Hi Bennett," and motioned to Malone. "This is —"

"We've met," I said.

Malone smiled agreement, and led Francine to the liquor supply.

Mrs. Greerson linked an arm through her husband's and said with faint reproach, "Jack, I'm delighted to have Fran and her young man, but you should have told me."

He jerked impatiently away from her. "Sorry," he said shortly. "I stopped at Mike's Bar for a drink, and they were there — it seemed like a good idea to ask them." He moved to join Malone and Francine.

Mrs. Greerson gazed after him, her eyes puzzled, and then she turned and smiled at me. "I think you need a drink, Mr. Bennett."

"Call me Jim," I said, smiling.

"All right. My name is Evelyn."

"Fine. Let me make the drink."

"Bring it to the kitchen," she said. "I'd better thaw out two more steaks." She turned and entered the house.

I moved to the table. Jack Greerson was stirring a pitcher of martinis, and I saw that Glenn Malone was pouring bourbon into two tall glasses, presumably for Francine and himself. I said to Greerson, "Your wife needs a drink in the kitchen."

He filled a glass and handed it to me. "Give her my regards," he said.

"She's very attractive," I murmured.

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He said something I didn't catch, something short and bitter, and filled a highball glass with martini cocktail. I shuddered a little at the size of the drink and turned away. Francine Hopkins stood a little apart, waiting for Malone to bring her a drink. I paused beside her and said in a low voice, "I want to talk to you — alone. It's important."

She started to answer, her small dark face strained, but Glenn Malone came up and handed her a glass. "There you are, darling," he said cheerfully. "Drink up."

Out on the terrace I heard Greerson say to Malone, "After dinner I'll take you back to Mike's to pick up your car."

"All right." Malone put an arm around Francine. "Isn't she gorgeous? We're going to be married, you know."

Greerson stared at him, his glass halfway to his mouth. "Married?" he said incredulously. "When the hell did this happen?"

"This afternoon," Malone said, somewhat smugly, I thought.

I didn't listen any more. I crossed the living room and a dining area, where a table was set for three people, and entered a small bright kitchen. Evelyn Greerson had tied a frilly apron over her dress and was placing tenderloin fillets on the broiling pan of an electric stove. She turned, smiled at me and accepted the martini I held for her. "Your husband sends his regards," I said.

A faint frown wrinkled her forehead for an instant. Then she said, "That was sweet of him." She sipped her drink, placed it on a table, and began taking china from a cupboard. "How do you like your steak, Jim?" she asked over her shoulder.

"Medium rare. . . . Will you do me a small favor?"

She turned, her arms full of dishes, her eyes puzzled. "Favor?"

"I want to talk to Francine — alone. I can't get her away from Malone."

She gazed at me thoughtfully, and for a moment I was afraid she was going to ask me a question. About how I knew Francine, for example. But she didn't. She said, "I'll fix it. Wait here." She placed the dishes on the table and left.

I waited. In a moment she appeared with Francine, and said, "I told her I needed her in the kitchen," and nodded at a screened door. "Why don't you go out on the back porch?"

Francine looked slightly bewildered as I took her arm and led her out the door. We stood on a small porch partially concealed by morning glory vines on a mesh of wire. I spoke quickly in a low voice. "Francine, I've got bad news. Your mother had another bad attack. They don't expect her to live much longer. She wants to see you before she dies."

Her mouth quivered, and she averted her face. She didn't speak.

I said gently, "I think you should go. I'll be glad to take you — now."

"No," she said in a choked voice.

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Behind us in the kitchen Evelyn Greerson rattled dishes.

I said, "Think it over. Your mother has sent word that she doesn't care what you have done, that she will forgive you — and leave all her money and property to you, if you will come to her before she dies. That's all she asks. There are no strings to it. Otherwise, you won't get a dime, and she'll make it stick. The lawyers will see to that."

I saw the glint of tears on her cheeks, and her small slender body seemed to shiver. "No," she said again. "I — I needed her once, very badly. I don't need her now. Or her money, or — or anything." She raised her head to look at me, and I saw the pitiful defiance in her eyes and the trembling red mouth. "I'm sorry that she is — is dying. But for me she died two years ago, when — when . . ." Her voice broke and she turned away.

I sighed deeply and dropped her hands. "If you change your mind, let me know. It may be too late by morning. Maybe it's too late now."

Silently she turned toward the door. I touched her arm lightly. "One thing more — is it true what Malone said? Are you going to marry him?"

"I — I don't know. I like Glenn, but it's too soon after — after . . ." She suppressed a sob and left.

I entered the kitchen. It was filled with the delicious odor of broiling steak. Evelyn Greerson turned away from the stove, her face flushed. "It's too hot to have steak, but Jack loves it."

"Where's Francine?" I asked.

She nodded toward the door leading to the living room. "In there, I guess. She was crying. The poor girl's had a rough time. Jack told me about what happened last night, and it's in the papers tonight. I hope they catch the person who killed Johnny Wingate."

"Did you know of Francine's plan to marry him?"

She nodded gravely. "She told me about a month ago, when Johnny came to see her. She brought him here one Sunday afternoon, when Jack was playing golf. She made me promise not to tell Jack — she wanted to tell him herself, and not until just before she left. It was a secret between Francine and me." She regarded me with a level gaze. "So you know Francine?"

"I met her at the office yesterday," I said, thinking that Evelyn Greerson was curious about my private conversation with Francine, and changed the subject. "What did you think of Wingate?"

She shrugged and said carelessly, "I didn't like him particularly. He seemed rather vain and immature, but I guess Francine loved him." She sighed and smiled brightly. "Why don't you go out on the terrace and have another drink? Dinner will be ready in a few minutes."

I nodded at her empty glass. "How about you?"

She shook her head. "Two is my limit before dinner."

I left her then, before she could think of more questions to ask me.

I moved across the empty living room and paused by the screened French

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doors leading to the terrace. Francine was not out there. Glenn Malone and Jack Greerson faced each other over the cocktail table. I was about to push open the door when I heard Greerson say harshly, "Damn you, why don't you leave her alone? You didn't wait long to move in, did you?"

Malone said quietly, "I can't see that it's any of your business."

"She works for me," Greerson said in the same harsh voice, "and I want you to leave her alone. Understand?"

"To hell with you," Malone said.

Abruptly Greerson swung a fist. He was bigger than Malone, and much heavier. The fist landed on the side of Malone's jaw and Malone staggered, knocking some bottles from the table with a crash of breaking glass. Greerson stood waiting, his fist cocked. Malone regained his balance and touched his jaw tenderly. "For God's sake," he said. "You're drunk. Let's forget it."

Greerson swung his fist again. Malone ducked nimbly, came up under Greerson' guard and hit the bigger man twice on the chin with quick darting jabs and then jumped back, dancing like a professional, his guard up. Greerson shook his head groggily, and lunged blindly forward, crashing into the table. More bottles hit the tile and alcoholic liquid foamed at their feet. I heard Malone say sharply, "Stop it," and then I was out on the terrace and grabbing Greerson by the arm.

He struggled wildly, but I held on and said soothingly, "Take it easy."

Behind me a voice said sharply, "What's the matter?"

I turned. Evelyn Greerson stood in the open doors. Behind her I saw the small pale face of Francine Hopkins. I nodded at the mess on the tile. "Just a little accident. We'll need a mop and a broom."

Evelyn Greerson's gaze swung from me to her husband and finally to Glenn Malone. Greerson didn't turn around, but Malone grinned ruefully and said, "I'm sorry. It was my fault. Very clumsy of me."

"Never mind," she said in an oddly brittle voice. "I'll clean it up later. Dinner is ready now." She went back into the house. Francine followed her.

The three of us stood in the dusk and a quickening breeze. None of us spoke.

Dinner was a dismal affair. While Malone, Greerson and I finished our coffee, Evelyn Greerson and Francine cleared the table. Presently we three men were alone, and we heard the rattle of dishes in the kitchen and the sounds of intermittent conversation, with Evelyn Greerson's voice predominating.

Glenn Malone said to no one in particular, "Well, as soon as Francine is ready, we'd better be getting along."

Greerson looked up at him. "I'm sorry," he said abruptly, and then grinned a little wryly. "You're pretty handy with your fists."

Evelyn Greerson came in untying her apron. "I'm sorry to have to rush

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off," she said, glancing at her husband, "but I must see Sue Andrews — we're on the refreshment committee for a bridge benefit at the club. I hope you will excuse me." She looked once more at Greerson. "Can I get you anything, dear?" Before he could answer, she added with a touch of sarcasm, "More whisky, perhaps?"

He lifted a hand. "Run along, honey. Just run along. Give Sue my regards, and ask her to remind Walter of our golf date Saturday."

"All right," she said lightly, and turned to Francine. "I know you and Mr. Malone won't mind my running away, because you said you had to leave right after dinner anyway — and Jack and Mr. Bennett will want to talk business. Come along while I powder my nose."

Francine stood up, met Malone's intense gaze, gave him a wan smile and left the room with Evelyn Greerson. Jack Greerson left the table, and Malone and I followed him into the living room. Malone perched on the arm of a chair and idly turned the pages of a magazine, obviously waiting impatiently for Francine. In maybe five minutes the two women appeared. Malone stood up quickly, and I turned away from the window. Evelyn Greerson smiled at the two of us, went through the goodby-nice-to-have-met-you routine, and we murmured thanks for the drinks and dinner. She left the room, leaving a faint wave of freshly applied perfume behind her. I saw Greerson sniff suspiciously, and his jaw set in a hard line.

Glenn Malone put an arm around Francine's slim waist, pulled her to him and said to Greerson, "We're ready, if you are."

Greerson nodded. "You two get in my car. I'll be right out."

Malone led Francine to the door, giving us a cheerful salute.

Greerson said, "Fran."

She stopped and turned to face him, her eyes grave. "Yes?"

"Uh — I'll see you on Monday, won't I?"

"Of course," she said quietly. "I appreciate your taking me back."

"Fran," he said, "don't worry about — anything."

"I'll try not to." She turned away and went out with Malone. The front door closed behind them.

Greerson swung to me and said harshly, "All right, Bennett; you know what my wife looks like now. Follow her. Sue Andrews lives in a red brick house on a corner six blocks down the street — but she won't go there." His mouth twisted bitterly. "Did you catch that sexy perfume she was wearing?"

I ignored the question and put on my hat. "I'll see you later. There's something I want to talk to you about."

He eyed me for a moment, and then said evenly, "Talk to me now. Evelyn can't get out of the drive until I move my car. What's on your mind?"

"Francine's mother is in bad shape, maybe dead by now. She wants Francine to come home right away, now. But Francine won't budge. Can you do anything?"

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"Tonight?"

He sighed heavily and pulled a hand down over his face. "I — I see. I'll do what I can, but with that jerk, Malone, hanging around . . ." His eyes grew ugly.

The sound of a car horn outside cut off his words. He swung around and shouted at the closed door. "Shut up! Can't you wait to be with your lover?"

In the sudden quiet, I said, "I assume you are referring to Mrs. Greerson?"

Slowly he turned to face me. When he spoke, his voice was surprisingly quiet. "Bennett, I'm not paying you to ask silly questions. I just want you to follow my wife and get the name of the man she's seeing. I'll talk to Fran as soon as I can and advise her to go home to her mother. What more do you want?"

"I want you to talk to her now. Get your car out of the drive so your wife can leave. Then talk to Francine, and don't worry about Malone. He wants her to go home, too." I moved to the door. "I'll follow your wife, but I'll be back."

Outside the horn sounded again, more insistent.

Greerson strode past me for the door, but I stopped him with a hand on his arm. "Just a minute — Jack."

He turned impatiently. "What now?"

I said, "Before Johnny Wingate died, he mentioned a man's name. The name was Jack. He only said two words. The other was 'bush.' He died by a lilac bush. I think his killer hid behind the bush. Johnny recognized him, and his name was Jack. The police don't know this yet, but I'm thinking of telling them. I just thought you should know."

Greerson said in a queer, puzzled voice, "I don't know what you're getting at. Do you think —"

"Did you ever meet Wingate?" I said quickly. "Does he know you?"

The horn outside sounded once more, an impatient series of blasts.

Greerson said in a tight voice, "We'll talk about this later." He moved to the door, opened it.

I heard Evelyn Greerson's plaintive voice call out in the summer night, "Jack please hurry and move your car. I'm late."

"Yes, dear," he said savagely beneath his breath as he went out.

I watched by the front door until the Buick bearing Greerson, Francine and Glenn Malone backed down the drive and headed for Mike's Bar, wherever that was, so that Francine and Malone could transfer to Malone's shiny new Pontiac. Then the red Thunderbird backed to the street and followed the Buick. It was dark, but I could make out the black outline of the police Ford as it moved forward, its lights off. I stepped out to the stoop, closed the front door, and ran across the grass to my own car. I made an illegal U-turn and followed the Ford.

We made quite a caravan in the summer evening.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE POLICE CAR DIDN'T BOTHER with Evelyn Greerson, or me. It stayed on the tail of the Buick. Eight blocks away the Thunderbird turned right into a drive leading up to a squat brick house on a corner. Greerson's Buick and the police car kept going. I stopped at the curb maybe fifty feet from the brick house and turned off my lights. Evelyn Greerson got out of the Thunderbird and ran up the porch steps. A woman appeared in a lighted doorway to greet her. They talked a second, and then went inside. I saw a white post-lamp beside the drive with a metal plaque hanging from an iron support. I got out, moved to the post lamp, peered upward in the dusk and saw white letters on the plaque: *The Andersons.*

I went back to my car and silently cursed Jack Greerson. His wife had said she was going to see Sue Anderson, and she had told the truth. I lit a cigarette and slumped down behind the wheel prepared for a long wait. Two women planning refreshments for a bridge party could take hours.

But I was wrong.

Evelyn Greerson came out of the house before I'd finished my cigarette. I sat up straight, surprised, and watched her as she stood on the porch talking to the woman who had greeted her. Their voices came clearly to me in the soft night.

"Then it's all settled," Evelyn Greerson said. "You order the sandwiches and salad, and I'll take care of the dessert and coffee. See you at the club."

"You'd better come early," the woman said. "We'll need help with the table decorations. Marjorie is bringing flowers from her garden."

"I'll be there around twelve." Evelyn Greerson went down the steps.

I started the Mercury's motor, prepared to make another U-turn and follow her back to her home and husband, provided he had returned from taking Francine and Glenn Malone to Mike's Bar, and put the gear lever at *Drive.*

I was wrong again.

At the bottom of the steps Evelyn Greerson paused and turned. "Oh, Sue," she called, "don't forget the favor I asked."

"Don't you worry," the woman said gaily. "If Jack should call — and I don't see any reason why he should — I'll tell him that you just left here, but that you had an errand at the drug store. It might take you a little while, but you'll be home shortly. Is that right?"

"That's right, Sue," Evelyn Greerson said. "I knew I could count on you."

"You sure can," Sue said. "I think it's very — exciting, Evelyn, and I hope it works out for you."

"Thanks. 'Bye, Sue." I followed her to the MacFarland, where she got

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out and started walking.

She walked straight past the hotel entrance, not even glancing inside, and turned into the office building beyond. I sprinted a little and reached the doorway in time to see her heading for the elevators at the far end of a bare tiled lobby. I entered and stopped at a rack of newspapers not far from the elevators, where a young Negro girl in a blue uniform stood waiting. As I picked up a paper and pretended to read it, I heard Evelyn Greerson say to the girl, "Two, please."

They entered the elevator, and the door closed. I ran for the stairs. But the elevator was much faster. When I reached the second floor, panting a little, I heard crisp footsteps echoing along a corridor, and I peeked around a corner in time to see Evelyn Greerson stop before a frosted glass door with a light behind it. She glanced at her wrist watch, opened the door and disappeared. The door closed and there was a deep dusty silence in the empty corridor. I moved on tip-toe down to the frosted door. Black letters read: *McCann Business College— Day and Night Courses— Special Instruction by appointment.*

I went back to the stairs and down to the street. She could not possibly leave in her car, alone or otherwise, without my seeing her. I slumped behind the wheel to wait.

After twenty minutes I began to get sleepy. I yawned, and thought about some coffee. From the counter of The Malt Shop, I thought, I could still watch for Evelyn Greerson. I got out, crossed the sidewalk and entered the place. From the front stool I could plainly see the Thunderbird. A red-lipped juvenile with glossy shoulder-length brown hair and wearing a tight white uniform gave me a cup of black coffee and a check for ten cents. I sipped the coffee, which was bitter because it had been standing in the urn too long, and watched the car through the wide front window. Presently I saw a movement close to it, and I leaned forward, peering.

A man was walking slowly around the car, and I saw him pause and peek into the low-slung seat. Then he moved to the sidewalk and stared down toward the MacFarland Hotel, his hands on his hips. Because of the darkness and shadows, I couldn't see him very well; he was just a huge bulky shape, hatless, and wearing a light-colored shirt. Abruptly he turned, crossed the street and entered The Malt Shop. I saw his sullen, stupid, worm-pale face in the harsh light and felt a faint cold shock. It was Lester Beck, the simple-minded handy man who worked for Jack Greerson. I averted my face quickly.

He lumbered straight to a booth in the rear, as if he'd been in the place before, and sat down. The red-lipped girl swayed over to him and I heard her say wearily, "The usual?"

"Yep," Lester said. "Plenty of whipped cream, honey. How about going out with me tonight?"

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"Sure, sure, pal," the waitress said in the same weary voice. "I'd be simply delighted." She returned to the counter, leaned down and flipped open the metal lid of a freezer.

With my back to Lester I turned my head and gazed out of the window. The low red car was still there. I drank some more of the bitter coffee. The waitress made out a check, pursing her plump red lips as she wrote, and then carried a dish of ice cream and a glass of water to Lester. I turned my head. Lester sat facing me, but his head was bent down. I stood up and peered over the top of the booth. He held a stub of pencil in one big fist and appeared to be concentrating over a sheet of paper. He began to write, his loose lips moving silently, and paid no attention to the waitress as she put down his order.

Once more I glanced at the red Thunderbird parked across the street. I hated to leave my post, but I was curious about Lester. The waitress sauntered past me behind the counter, humming a tune beneath her breath. I said softly, "Miss."

She stopped and turned with a bored expression. "More coffee?"

I shook my head and laid a dollar on the counter. "I'm waiting for a friend and don't want to miss her. You aren't busy now — would you mind watching that car across the street? The Red Thunderbird?"

The Thunderbird part got her. She gazed out of the window, and when she turned back to me her expression wasn't quite so bored. "Yours?"

"No — my friend's. If you see her get in, will you call me?" I jerked my head toward Lester. "I'll be with him."

She took the bill and tucked it into a pocket of her uniform. "Okay, but I gotta mix pineapple dope pretty soon. If the boss comes in and sees it ain't made —"

"I won't be long." I slid off the stool, moved to Lester's booth and gazed down at him. He was so engrossed that he didn't notice me, and I saw that he was printing words on the paper, like a second-grader would print, awkwardly and carefully, in capital letters. I moved around until I could see over his shoulder. The message, or whatever it was, began MR. GREERSON. I couldn't see any more, because Lester's head was in the way. I sat down in the booth opposite him.

He became aware of me then and looked up with a startled guilty expression, like a kid nabbed with a finger in the cake frosting. Hastily he crumpled the paper and stuck it into a hip pocket. His watery pale eyes skittered away from my steady gaze, and he began to spoon his double caramel sundae, or whatever it was, into his mouth.

I said, "Hell, Lester. Remember me?"

He continued to shovel in the ice cream and chocolate trickled down his chin. His nervously wavering eyes were the only indication that he had heard me.

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"Writing a letter, Lester?"

The rhythmic motion of the spoon never faltered.

"I'll buy you another butterscotch sundae if you'll tell me what you were writing."

"Just stuff," he said uneasily, still staring at my shirt front.

"What kind of stuff, Lester?" I asked softly. "I'm interested."

"It's none of your business," he blurted, and started to stand up.

I reached up and put a hand on his shoulder. "Sit down, Lester," I said firmly. "I want to see that paper."

He was stooped over, half out of the booth, his big fleshy body pushing at the table, and he gazed down at me with a vacant cold glint in his pale eyes. I felt a slight chill, but said soothingly, "Another butterscotch sundae? Double?"

He mouthed two words, the first one obscene. I didn't have the time nor the inclination to be understanding and gentle, as I should have been, no doubt, and I thought grimly that even an infant could be trained in the use of proper and decent language. I slapped him, thinking bleakly that I was handling him all wrong.

He sank back into the booth, staring at me in incredulous surprise. Then his loose mouth began to pucker, like a kid about to cry, and tears entered his vacant pale eyes. I didn't glance back to see if the juvenile waitress was watching; I assumed that she was, and hoped that I could finish my business with Lester before she did something foolish, like calling the police.

But I was wrong again, for the fourth time this night. The waitress called to me in an oddly vicious voice, "Good for you, Mister. Slap him again. He comes in here all the time, pestering me. He gives me the crawling creeps."

"Watch the car," I told her without looking around.

Lester's fat white fingers touched his cheek tenderly. He sniffled and pulled a shirt sleeve across his nose. "You — hurt me." He was almost sobbing.

"Sorry. Give me that paper."

He shook his head stubbornly, his lower lip stuck out in a pouting expression. I said, "Lester, I'll count three, and if you don't give me that paper I'll beat the hell out of you." I wasn't at all certain that I could make good my threat, because he out-weighed me by at least thirty pounds. But I had suspected suddenly that he was deathly afraid of being hurt, of any kind of pain. "One," I said.

He hesitated, licking his lips, his gaze still shifting about, and there was sweat on his bulging pale forehead.

I reached across the table with my left hand, bunched the front of his shirt in my fist, and brought my hand back menacingly. "Two."

His big body trembled. And then slowly, very slowly, he reached behind him and laid the crumpled paper on the table. "That's better, Lester." I

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released him, smoothed out the paper and read the crudely printed words. He hadn't had time to finish, but it was enough. MR. GREERSON YOUR WIFE IS WITH THAT MAN AGAIN SHE AIN'T NO GOOD HONEST YOU BETTER DIVORCE HER RIGHT AWAY AND . . .

I folded the paper and put it in a coat pocket. "Tell me about it, Lester."

"You — you won't slap me again?"

"Not unless you don't behave."

He began to talk, but not to me. He talked to the top of the table, and he spoke sullenly, in a low voice, like a punished kid saying over and over, *I'm a bad boy.* "Mr. Greerson is a good guy. He's nice to me. I been trying to tell him about *her.* She's cheating on him. She's up there now with the guy. I been following her a long time, and I been writing to Mr. Greerson about it. If I told him to his face he wouldn't believe me and get mad at me."

"Who's the man?"

"McCann, his name. He runs a business school."

I felt like slapping him again, but restrained myself and said sternly, "It's none of your business, Lester."

His gaze shifted and he said in a whining voice, "I was just trying to do Mr. Greerson a favor, tip him off. He's been good to me, and I just happened to see her one night when I was coming out of a movie, sneaking out of the building with him. And after that I came down here and watched, and I saw her go in and come out, sometimes with him, and sometimes by herself, and . . ." He peered at me slyly. "You wanna know something else?"

"What?" I was getting a little sick of Lester.

"Mrs. Greerson likes me," he said boastfully. "Oh, she can't let on, but when she comes to the office she always speaks to me, and smiles, but she has to be careful, because Mr. Greerson is right there, watching her. She's pretty, and she smells nice, too. Real class." He winked at me broadly. "I got lots of girls, but I like her best, next to Francine. She's my *best* girl. Of course, Mrs. Greerson is married, but if he finds out about her he'll divorce her, and then *she'll* be my best girl."

"Two bests girls?" I asked.

He nodded eagerly. "That's right." He paused, frowned, and said seriously, "I know I gotta make up my mind which one I like best. It's a problem. I was afraid I'd lose Francine when I heard she was going to get married, but she won't get married now." He laughed happily. "Now I got two best girls."

A coldness settled over my shoulders. "Lester, why won't Francine get married now?"

"Because he's dead," he said simply.

I leaned forward, watching him. "How do you know?"

"I know," he said slyly, giving me an up-from-under look.

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"How, Lester?" My fingers were gripping the table.

"The guys at the garage was talking about it. I heard 'em. Somebody shot him last night, the guy she was going to marry. He played in a band." He fingered his empty dish. "I'll take that caramel sundae now — double. You promised."

"In a minute. Where were you last night?"

"At the movies, but I don't have to tell you —"

"Hey, Mister," the waitress called from behind me. "Somebody's getting in the car."

"Stay here," I told Lester, and left the booth. As I did so, two youths and two girls entered the place. The waitress greeted them gaily, "Hi, gang!" They clustered around the counter, blocking my path. When I had squeezed past and reached the door, the Thunderbird's lights were on and it was pulling out of the parking space. I had a fleeting glimpse of Evelyn Greerson's profile and as near as I could tell she was alone in the car. It was too late for me to follow her; in two minutes she would be lost in the traffic of the city. I said a few swear words under my breath. Then I went back to the booth.

Lester was gone.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THERE WAS A BACK DOOR, but by the time I reached it, after passing through a cluttered store room in the rear of The Malt Shop, and stood in a dark alley in the hot night there was no sign of Lester. I knew it would be futile to try and find him. I walked down the alley to the street and back to where I'd left my car. I stood there a moment and wondered dismally what my next move would be. I walked away from my car and crossed the street to the MacFarland Hotel. In a phone booth I looked in the book and called the McCann Business College next door. A man answered and I asked, "Is Mrs. Greerson there?"

"No, she left a few minutes ago." He had a dry precise voice.

"Is this Mr. McCann?"

"Speaking. What can I do for you?"

I hesitated. Then I said, "This is Mr. Greerson. I —"

"Oh, yes." He laughed softly, a sound like rustling paper. "Apparently she couldn't keep her secret from you any longer."

"Secret?"

"Why, yes, Mr. Greerson — about her taking a stenographic and secretarial course to surprise you. Since you called here, I assumed that she had

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at last told you where she's been spending so many of her evenings these past weeks. She — ah — graduated tonight, and was only here a short time — just for a final typing speed test. Fifty-five perfect words a minute, Mr. Greerson. That's very good."

"Yes, indeed," I said. "I'm proud of her."

"You should be," he said sincerely. "So you haven't a thing to worry about."

"Worry about?" I said dumbly.

"You've lost your regular secretary, haven't you? Because she got married? Mrs. Greerson intended to surprise you by taking your secretary's place. She told me that she had even arranged for someone to care for the children. She feels that wives should be real help-mates to their husbands, not just housekeepers, and I must say that I agree. Mrs. McCann and I have always worked together. She teaches my morning classes in typing and shorthand."

"That's fine," I said. "Thank you very much, Mr. McCann."

We hung up.

I called for Detective Sergeant Corzetti. The cop on the desk told me he'd gone home for the night. I asked for his home number and the cop said he was not permitted to give it except in emergencies. I said this was an emergency, and gave my name. He hesitated, and I heard him conversing with someone else. Then he gave me the number. I thanked him and called it. Corzetti answered himself.

I said, "This is Bennett. I'm sorry to bother you at your home, but maybe you'd better know a couple of things."

"About what?" He sounded tired and irritable.

"About the Wingate killing."

"What's on your mind?"

"Thanks for taking the tail off me."

"You're welcome. I need men — and I figured you didn't kill Wingate." His last remark was edged with sarcasm.

"I appreciate that, Sergeant. I see you're still tailing Francine Hopkins."

"You're damn right."

"I caught up with her, but she refuses to go home to her dying mother."

"Too bad. What else you got on your mind?"

"That singer in Wingate's band, Sally Valdez. She —"

"I know," he said impatiently. "She talked to me late this afternoon. Said that the piano player, Delane, killed Wingate out of jealousy and because he wanted to take over the band. I didn't buy it, but I'm still checking."

"Did Delane really have a gun?"

"Yeah — a rusty .22. Wingate was killed with a .38."

"You're way ahead of me, Sergeant. Sally figured that with Delane's help *she* could take over the band. But he gave her a big fat No, and now

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she's the woman scorned, trying to get even."

"Yes," he said. "I'm tired, Bennett."

"Hang on a minute; Francine Hopkins worked for Jack Greerson. He didn't want her to quit and get married. Or maybe he just didn't want her to get married. I think he's sweet on Francine, and he gave me a story about his wife cheating on him. Maybe it was just an excuse to make a play for Francine — sauce for the goose stuff. Anyhow, I figure that whoever killed Wingate didn't want Francine to marry Wingate, or the other way around — otherwise, why wait until the night Francine kept her tryst with him?"

"Go on," Corzetti said grimly.

"All right. Whatever it was that Greerson wanted, he got. Francine can't marry Wingate now, and she's going back to work for Greerson."

Corzetti said impatiently, "Is Greerson's wife really playing around?"

"No." I told him of my conversation with Mr. McCann, and of Evelyn Greerson's desire to be her husband's secretary. "Francine had confided in Mrs. Greerson, told her about the planned wedding and even introduced her to Wingate, and between them they cooked up the idea of Mrs. Greerson taking Francine's place in her husband's office. And they kept it a secret from Greerson; Francine didn't even tell him she was quitting until the day she left."

"I see," Corzetti said. "Anything else?"

I said, "Sergeant, Francine told me that just before Wingate died he mentioned a man's name. It was Jack."

For a moment he didn't answer, and I heard him sigh. When he spoke his voice was brittle. "Did Wingate and Greerson know each other? Would Wingate recognize him?"

"I asked Greerson tonight, but he didn't give me an answer. He said we'd talk about it later."

"I see," Corzetti said.

"He's sort of a client, but I thought I'd better tell you. And Francine told me that Wingate said something else, before the name, something about a bush. He was lying beside a lilac bush, you know, and whoever killed him had probably hidden there, waiting for Wingate to come out of the dance hall."

"I see," Corzetti said again. "Wingate tried to tell her that the killer had hid behind the lilac bush, and that his name was Jack."

"Yes, but you can't arrest Jack Greerson on that, even if he is the only Jack connected with this."

"I know," he said wearily. "Thanks, Bennett. Good night."

"Wait — there's more."

"Let's have it."

"Glenn Malone was with Francine all afternoon, you know. I saw him tonight and he seemed happy. He's nuts about Francine, wants to marry

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her. It looks like he was her number two choice, and now that her true love, Johnny Wingate, is dead, I assume that Malone is now number one. I was just thinking that if the killer rubbed out Wingate because of Francine, he might try to do the same to Malone. It's just a thought."

"I'll bear all your thoughts in mind," Corzetti said dryly.

I didn't answer and he hung up. I had planned to also tell him about Lester Beck and his yearning for Francine and Evelyn Greerson, his poison pen notes to Greerson, his sly lustful watching of the latter's wife, all about Lester; and about the scuffle between Glenn Malone and Jack Greerson on the terrace before dinner. I had even intended to tell him of the youth at Rainbow Terrace who had given Johnny Wingate the message which had lured him to his death, and to give him Sally Valdez's description of the youth, but I thought to hell with it. I had told Corzetti enough, and could give him the story of the amorous and moronic Lester later, and the rest, if I wanted to, and the need arose.

I left the booth. Sally Valdez was coming across the lobby toward me. She was still wearing the green low-cut sleeveless dress, the jaunty black straw hat, and still carrying the small black purse. Our eyes met at the same instant, and I said politely, "Good evening, Miss Valdez."

She shot me a look of pure hate, tilted her nose, and swept past me to the elevators, leaving a scent of alluring perfume. I watched her as she entered the elevator, noting with appreciation the trim lines of her small figure. The elevator door closed and she was gone.

I looked at a big clock over the desk. Seven minutes until ten. For a moment I considered seriously going up to Sally Valdez's room and talking to her, if she would admit me, but I remembered our short and bitter scene on the sidewalk in front of the Deshler-Hilton and decided against it. One thing puzzled me; she had really carried out her threat to go to the police with her accusation of Skippy Delane, and I had been certain that she was bluffing. I sighed again and went out into the hot night.

I crossed to my car and got in. Through the windows of The Malt Shop I saw that it was filling up, mostly with 'teen-agers, and the juvenile waitress was busy serving them. I sat with my hands on the wheel, wondering where I should go, what I should do, if anything. To the hotel and bed? I was tired. The martinis I'd had at the Greerson home had died long ago, but I didn't want a drink. I lit a cigarette, found immediately that I didn't want it, either, and snapped it to the pavement. I started the Mercury, eased out of the parking space, and was presently once again cruising down High Street. After a time I realized that I was heading for the home of Mr. and Mrs. Jack Greerson.

The red Thunderbird was parked near the garage. The drapes had been pulled almost shut across the wide picture window, but there was a glow

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behind them and a bright slit of light where they parted in the center. I drifted on past, stopped beneath the branches of an elm and cut the lights. Since the Thunderbird was there, I decided that Evelyn Greerson had arrived home after my phone call. Or had arrived before and ignored it. As I watched, a cream-colored Buick turned into the drive and stopped behind the Thunderbird. Jack Greerson got out and entered the house and a shadow crossed behind the drapes of the living room. I left the Mercury and walked swiftly across the street and over the soft lawn to the stubby pines beneath the front window. By stooping and peering over the tops of the pines I had a fairly clear view of the room between the slightly parted drapes.

Jack Greerson and his wife faced each other in the center of the room. Greerson's face held a sullen, angry look, but his wife was smiling as she talked, moving her hands, apparently explaining something. Abruptly Greerson swung away and left the room. His wife started after him, but stopped with a small helpless gesture, turned and moved out of my line of vision. I crouched down and waited for the sound of Greerson's car starting. But there was no sound, not even a door opening and closing. Just silence. I wondered uneasily where Greerson had gone. I didn't want him to catch me skulking about his house, and I wondered bleakly what the hell I was doing there, anyhow. What did I hope to gain? The thing to do, now that I was here, was to march up to the front door, ask for Greerson, and then tell him privately about his wife's innocent ~ tivities at the business college. I turned toward the front door.

I heard a soft sound behind me, like a whisper in the night, and before I could move there came a blinding wicked jolt on the back of my head and it seemed that the night was suddenly showered with whirling yellow lights. I crashed forward on my knees into the pines and the needles stabbed my hands and face. Above me there was a hoarse grunting sound and something slammed against my head again. I clutched the trees, tried to stay on my knees, but they wouldn't support me any more and I fell under the trees and smelled pine tar and felt damp earth against my face. I rolled over and instantly felt a crushing bulk on my chest. Fists thudded into my face and I tasted blood on my lips. I twisted and squirmed, got my knees up. The bulk on my chest shifted, and then went away, and I let fly with my feet. I heard a gusty sigh of pain and whooshing breath, and then the thud of feet running away over the grass.

I rolled over groggily, pulled the gun from my coat and aimed with my right arm stretched over the grass. There wasn't much to aim at, just a dark, fast-moving figure disappearing into the blackness by the garage, but I squeezed the trigger and orange flame burned across the grass. The figure was just a blinking blur after that, and then was gone.

I rolled over on my back and lay still, staring up at the night sky.

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I don't know how long it was before I heard the voice above me. It could have been a minute after I'd fired my gun, or ten minutes. Or twenty. I opened my eyes. The stars were still there, a few of them, twinkling in the sky, and a black cloud sailed across the August moon.

The voice spoke sharply. "Bennett! What happened?"

I squinted upward at the figure kneeling over me. It hurt when I moved my jaw, and my voice was a croak as I spoke to Jack Greerson. "Hello," I said.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE WHISKY WAS SCOTCH and it was straight. It burned my bloody lips and made a small warm glow in my stomach. The deep soft chair was comforting. I felt weak, but not too weak to hold the glass. Evelyn Greerson knelt beside me holding a basin of water. She began to bathe my lips and face gently, and the coolness felt wonderful. Jack Greerson stood behind her. He drew on a cigarette and his eyes were worried as he watched me. He said, "Maybe we'd better get a doctor."

"We'll see," his wife said. "I think he'll be all right." She spoke to me. "Lean forward a little. I want to look at the back of your head."

Obediently I bent forward. Her fingers moved tenderly, exploring an area beneath my hair. "A little swelling," she said. "Does it hurt?"

"Some," I said, and drank more Scotch.

She bathed the area with a cold wet cloth. A little water trickled down beneath my shirt collar, but I didn't mind. I looked up at Jack Greerson. He said, "I was in the kitchen, making a drink, when I heard what sounded like a shot. I ran outside, but it was a couple of minutes before I found you. Do you feel like talking?"

"Let him rest a little," Evelyn Greerson protested.

"I'm all right," I said, watching Greerson. "Did you see anybody outside?"

He shook his head. "Nobody but a few neighbors who heard the shot, too. One of them helped me carry you in here. I guess they're still standing around outside." He frowned. "What the hell happened?"

I said, "I tried to call you from down town. Nobody answered, so I came out. I was crossing the lawn when somebody came up from behind and slugged me. I went down, but I took a shot at him as he was running away. Then I guessed I kind of passed out."

"Do you think you hit him?"

"I don't know. I didn't get a look at him, either."

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Greerson's frown grew deeper. "Some prowler, probably. Maybe we'd better call the police."

I shook my head. "I'll handle it." I pushed myself up from the chair. I wobbled a little, and Greerson grasped my arm.

I pushed his hand away and stood steadily, even though it seemed that tiny bells were tinkling in my brain. "I wanted to talk to you," I said, "but it can wait until morning."

"That's wise," Evelyn Greerson said. "I'm sure you don't feel like talking business tonight." She left the room carrying the basin.

Greerson and I faced each other. I said, "Your wife hasn't been cheating. I think it was silly of you to think she was."

"Okay," he said harshly. "I was wrong. She told me about it tonight, what she's been doing at the business school. How was I to know?"

"It would have been easy to follow her and find out."

He shrugged.

"Do you want to believe her?"

"What kind of crack is that?" Anger flared in his eyes.

I eyed him a moment, decided to let it go. I said, "Did Johnny Wingate know you?"

"No," he said flatly. "I never met him."

"All right, but would he have known you by sight, maybe?"

"How do I know? What're you getting at, Bennett?"

"Can you prove where you were at eleven-thirty last night?"

"I don't have to prove anything," he snapped.

"Not to me," I said. "The police will think differently."

He clenched a fist and took a step forward, and there was something in his eyes — rage, or maybe fear.

"Relax," I told him. "Where's my gun?"

He stood still. "Lying out by the shrubbery." He paused, eyeing me. "I didn't want Evelyn to see it."

"She must have heard the shot, too."

"She didn't ask any questions about it. What difference does it make?"

I said, "I told her I was a traffic manager for a brewing company down here to see you on business. She might wonder why a traffic manager carries a gun."

"Don't worry about it," he said shortly.

"I won't. Let's go out and look around a little."

Evelyn Greerson entered the room then and gazed at us with a faintly puzzled expression. I smiled at her. "We talked a little business, after all. We're going out now and look around a bit."

My gun was lying beneath one of the little pines beside my panama. I dropped the gun into my inside coat pocket and put on the hat, tilting it forward, away from the tender lump on the back of my head. Then I followed

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Greerson around the house to the garage. With the aid of the flash Greerson and I searched the area at the rear of the house, but we didn't see anything except bushes, a few trees, the playground equipment, and the slimy glitter of some fat night crawlers lying in the wet grass, ready to suck themselves down into their earthy lairs.

Greerson walked with me to the front of the house. I said, "Why haven't you asked me about the notes you've been getting? Those little missives warning you of your wife's infidelity?"

"Some crackpot," he said carelessly. "Does it matter now?"

"Yes, it matters. Your handyman, Lester, wrote them. I caught him at it tonight. Seems he yearns for your wife, and Francine, too. Thinks he's a lady's man, because your wife smiles at him. And she smells nice. He spotted her coming out of the business school one night and figured she was having an affair with the guy who runs the school. So he got the screwball idea of writing you those notes with the hope that you'd divorce her so that she could acknowledge her love for him, Lester, the great lover. You'd better do something about him; he's big enough to hurt somebody." I handed him the note I'd taken from Lester. "You can add this to your collection."

He took the note without looking at it and stuffed it into the pocket of his shirt. In the dim light from the front door I saw his gaze shift away from mine. "All right," he said shortly. "Thanks. I'll see you later." He turned away.

A car swung into the drive and I squinted in the glare of the headlights. Greerson paused and turned, peering at the car. I stepped out of the beam of light and recognized Glenn Malone's new red Pontiac. The lights went off and Malone came around to the right side, but the door opened before he reached it and Francine Hopkins got out with a flash of slim legs. She stood beside Malone and called in a tremulous voice, "Jack, is that you?"

Greerson moved toward them. "Yes," he said sharply. "What's wrong?"

I followed Greerson, aware that Evelyn Greerson had come out of the house and was standing on the stoop. Francine Hopkins said, "Jack, something has — has happened."

"What?" he asked in the same sharp voice.

"Somebody shot at us a while ago. I — I mean, they shot at Glenn, while he was waiting for me in front of Mrs. Carewe's house, but they — they might have thought I was in the car with him." She pointed a trembling finger at the windshield of the Pontiac, and I saw two jagged holes, one above the other, on the driver's side, surrounded by a web of cracked glass.

"My God," Greerson said, and swung toward Malone. "Did you get a look at him?"

Malone shook his head. "A car came down the street toward me, slow, and when it was almost to me it swerved right at me and I saw the fire and heard the shots, and then it drove away fast. For a second I didn't know what had

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happened. Then I realized . . ." He wiped a hand over his face.

Behind us Evelyn Greerson uttered a small sound of compassion. Then she went to Francine and put an arm around her. "How horrible. You'd better stay with us tonight, Fran. Did you tell the police?"

"No," Malone said. "Not yet. I thought I'd better bring her here first." He paused, and then added, half shyly, "Fran and I are going to be married tomorrow."

For a moment no one spoke. Then Greerson said in a tight voice, "That's fast work, Malone. Congratulations."

"Thanks," Malone said quietly. "I think Fran realizes now that it wouldn't have worked out — if she'd gone away with Wingate." He smiled at Francine. "Isn't that right?"

She nodded silently.

I thought, *Two bridegrooms-to-be. One dead. And somebody wants the other one dead, too,* and I moved to the Pontiac and opened the door on the driver's side, automatically turning on the interior lights. There were two small holes in the fabric of the back of the right front seat. I closed the door and moved around to the little group standing beside the drive. They were all watching me. I said, "The slugs will be in there. The police will want them."

Malone sighed deeply. "Golly, it was close. And when I think that Fran might have been in there with me . . ." He pulled her close to him.

I started to speak, but changed my mind. It had suddenly occurred to me that it had been less than an hour since I'd seen Jack Greerson come home, just before I was attacked. I said to Malone, "How long ago did it happen?"

"About an hour. It took us that long to get here, with the traffic." He said to Francine, "You'd better go in and get some sleep. I'll see you tomorrow."

Evelyn Greerson said, "I think you both better stay — at least, until the police have made an investigation."

Malone said carelessly, "Oh, I don't think that's necessary."

"Yes," Jack Greerson said suddenly. "Stay here. They might try it again."

"I agree," I said to Malone. "Both of you stay here tonight. I'll talk to the police."

From inside the house the phone began to ring.

Greerson said, "I'll get it," and entered the house.

The rest of us stood silently in the hot night, and no one spoke. It was as if all of us were waiting, wondering about the phone call at this time of night.

Then Greerson came out, his tall heavy body silhouetted against the light, and walked up to us in the gloom. His face was grave as he spoke to his wife.

"I've got to go away for a while. That was Pop Beck!"

"Lester's father?" she asked.

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Greerson nodded. "Yes. Lester's in some kind of trouble. Pop wants me to come over and try and talk to him."

"Trouble?" Evelyn Greerson frowned. "What kind of trouble?"

Greerson hesitated, and then looked directly at me. "Lester came home a while ago with a bullet wound in his arm, and he won't tell how he got it."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

WE ALL RODE IN MY CAR to Lester's. Presently, following Greerson's directions, we stopped before a small drab house in a section many blocks from the Greerson residence. There were only a few houses here and they were scattered along a narrow paved road with weedy fields between them. To the north bright lights hit the sky and there was the faraway sound of puffing switch engines on spur tracks. I guessed that this isolated area was on the fringes of an industrial section.

Greerson said, "Bennett and I will go on. The rest of you wait. It would look queer if we all went in, and, besides, I think I can handle Lester." He got out, and I slid over the seat after him. Francine started to protest, but Greerson paid no attention. I followed him up a cracked cement sidewalk to a narrow porch with rotten wooden steps.

A thin old man in overalls and a soiled sleeveless undershirt stood behind a rusty screen door with jagged holes patched with twine. He peered out at us in the yellow light from the room behind him. "Is that you, Jack?"

"Yeah, Pop," Greerson said. "I brought a friend. This is Mr. Bennett."

The old man squinted at me through steel-rimmed glasses. "Howdy," he said. "If you're a friend of Jack's you're welcome, but I guess he told you this ain't no social visit." He had a thin, lined face and neatly combed gray hair.

"He told me," I said. "I'm sorry about Lester."

"You know Lester?" His voice was surprised.

"I've met him."

He opened the door and stepped aside as Greerson and I entered. "He's in his room," he said in an undertone. "He locked the door and won't come out."

We stood in a small room crowded with too much furniture, all of it old and shabby, all except a television set, which was bright and new, with a mammoth screen, at least a twenty-seven inch job, I guessed, and housed in a gleaming cabinet also containing a phonograph and radio. A lumpy red-eyed woman sat in a chair across the room. Her face was puffy from weeping and she dabbed at her eyes with a wadded handkerchief. The place smelled

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of ancient cooking, with fresh overtones of boiled cabbage.

The old man said to Greerson, "You've met my wife?"

Greerson nodded and smiled at the woman, who covered her face with her hands and began to sob. "My poor baby," she wailed. "My little baby."

The old man said uneasily, "I hated to bother you, Jack, but I didn't know what to do. He wouldn't tell me where he was. He slammed into his room and locked the door."

"He's bleeding to death," the woman wailed. "My baby!"

The old man ignored her and spoke bitterly to Greerson. "She's been like that since Lester was born. Always babying him."

"I'll talk to him," Greerson said. "Get him to come out."

"I can't. I tried. He's just sitting in there in the dark, and he don't even answer me."

"We'll break the door down," Greerson said harshly. "Come on." He started across the room toward a curtained archway, but stopped abruptly.

The curtains parted and Lester stood there. His lips were parted in a vacant grin and his pale eyes were sly and bright. Dark hair clung to his sweaty forehead in damp ringlets. He wore a white T-shirt, splattered with blood, and his left forearm was crudely wrapped in what appeared to be a pillow case, also bloodstained. With his right hand he held a double-barreled shotgun cradled against his side. It was pointed directly at me, and I saw that two of his fat white fingers were curled around the twin triggers.

The twin barrels of the gun bore steadily on me, and Lester said happily, "So it's you, Mr. Face-Slapper? How're you this evening?"

"Fine, Lester," I heard my voice say.

"I fooled you, didn't I? I sneaked out of The Malt Shop and you never caught me. I'm too smart for you." He giggled, a sickening liquid sound.

"Sure, Lester. You're real smart."

The old man spoke in a quavering voice. "Listen, boy, put that gun down. You'll get hurt."

"I'm hurt already," Lester said, and waggled the gun at me. "He hurt me. He slapped me, and he shot me, at Mr. Greerson's house, just because I tried to get even with him for slapping me. Now I'll really get even." The gun barrel steadied on me, and I saw the oddly vacant stare in Lester's eyes, as if he were thinking of something else, something far away. I felt very lonely standing there and wondered if it would be worthwhile to grab for my gun, or to chance a dive at Lester.

Behind me I heard Greerson say in a low voice, "Is the gun loaded?"

"I — I don't know," I heard the old man falter. "I had it hid, with some shells, but he found it. . . ."

"Does he know how to load it?" Greerson's voice was intense.

"Yes, if he remembers. I taught him when he was a little boy, before we knew — before we knew about him."

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I heard Greerson sigh deeply, and for a moment there was silence. Then Greerson spoke harshly to Lester. "Put that gun down, right now. You hear, Lester?"

Lester started a little, as if he were awakening from a trance, but the gun never wavered from me, and a hurt expression entered his vacant eyes. His loose mouth quivered as he said to Greerson, "Don't make me put it down. I gotta do this. I — I gotta kill him."

I said, "Like you killed Johnny Wingate? And like you tried to kill Glenn Malone? Because of Francine?"

His eyes brightened. "Francine? Where is she?"

"Here I am," a soft voice behind me said. I didn't turn to look, but I knew that she was there, on the porch, speaking through the screen.

"For my sake, Lester," Francine pleaded, "put the gun down."

There was sweat on Lester's fat face. He shook his head stubbornly. "No, I won't. Get out of the way, Francine."

Greerson spoke soothingly. "Lester, listen to me. Put the gun down, and I'll do everything I can to help you. I'm you're friend, you know that. Do as I say." As he spoke, Greerson moved past me toward Lester.

Lester stepped back quickly and swung the gun in a wavering arc. "I — I can't," he sobbed. "Please don't make me kill you, too, Mr. Greerson. I just wanna kill *him*. He slapped me, and I don't take that from nobody, not even from Mom and Pop. Nobody can slap me." Tears ran down his puffy cheeks. "This is something I gotta do, honest."

Greerson stopped. I could see the fear in his eyes as he gazed at the gun.

In the sudden quiet another voice spoke. "Lester, for my sake, put that gun down, please. We'll help you. All of us want to help you . . ." Evelyn Greerson sounded on the edge of hysteria.

Lester seemed not to have heard her. Once more the vacant expression crept into his pale eyes, and his jaw went slack. "I'll do it now," he said, as if speaking to himself. "Right this second." The gun steadied on me with a deadly finality. I saw his fingers tighten on the triggers.

I jumped for him then. It was all that was left for me to do. The room seemed to rock with a blast of an explosion, but I kept going, ducking low, and thinking wildly to come up under the gun. But before I reached Lester, his body jerked violently and he whirled sideways with a howl of pain. The shotgun thudded to the worn carpet. I scrambled for it on my hands and knees, but it was snatched from beneath my reaching fingers. I looked upward dumbly, thinking for a horrible instant that Lester had the gun again, but it was Glenn Malone who stood over me holding it in his left hand. His right hand was hunched around a black revolver with a short wicked snout, and he was watching Lester. I followed his gaze. Lester clawed at the curtains in the archway, pulled them from the supporting rod, and crashed to the wall in a dim passageway. As he slid down the wall

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to the floor, still howling like an injured animal, Malone sprang forward and struck him on the head with the revolver. I heard the distinct *thunk*. Lester's howling stopped abruptly and he lay still, slumped against the wall, his legs stretched out. There was blood on his right arm now, near the shoulder, where Malone had shot him.

Malone turned slowly, holding the shotgun and the revolver, and gazed down at me. "Golly," he breathed. "He wasn't fooling — he was going to *kill* you."

"You bet," I panted. "Thanks." I stood up slowly.

The old woman pushed herself from the chair and tottered to the still form of her son. "My baby," she cried brokenly. "What have they done to you?" She knelt over him and patted his flabby cheeks with frantic hands. "Open your eyes, boy! Speak to your mother!"

The old man went to her and tried to pull her away. "He's not hurt bad," he said harshly. "Maybe you'll listen to me now. Maybe now you'll let me send him away — before he kills somebody."

I wiped sweat from my face and I thought, *It's too late, Pop. Your boy has already killed. He killed Johnny Wingate and he tried to kill Glenn Malone, and he almost killed me. Lock the barn, Pop, after the horses are stolen, that's the stuff.*

"All right, Pop," Greerson said wearily. "I was wrong, and you were right." He nodded at Lester's still figure. "You'd better call a doctor."

"He's dead!" the old woman wailed. "My baby's dead!"

Lester's father said heavily, "We ain't got a phone. I'll have to walk over to the neighbor's." He went out. The screen door slammed behind him.

I said to Malone, "Lucky for me you had a gun."

"I keep it in the car," he said. "It belongs to the company. I take cash deposits to the bank, and I have a permit. When I saw Lester with the shotgun, I brought it in with me."

"And a good thing for me you did," I said. "Thanks, again."

He looked embarrassed, and then broke the shotgun, ejecting two shells.

"It was loaded, all right," Greerson said.

I nodded, and shivered a little. Greerson looked at me and jerked his head toward the door. As I followed him out to the porch, I was aware of Evelyn Greerson's puzzled eyes. Francine stood beside her, watching Lester and his mother with an expression of pity on her small pale face. And then I stood on the porch in the night beside Greerson.

He said in a low voice, "Maybe we'd better get the police, too."

"We'll see," I said. "Perhaps the doctor can handle it — see about getting Lester committed, I mean."

He sighed heavily. "I'm sorry, Bennett. He was really going to kill you."

"I know. I owe young Malone a lot."

He said, "So Lester killed Wingate?"

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I glanced at him quickly, but his face in the light from the house was impassive. I said, "Yes," and opened the screen door. "Why don't you take the women home? Malone and I will wait for the doctor."

He shook his head. "I'd better stay. I — I feel responsible for Lester. Pop was right. I really thought Lester was harmless — his mother convinced me, I guess. But Pop warned me . . ." He sighed again. "The trouble a guy can get into, trying to help people."

"Amen," I said.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE DOCTOR WAS A YOUNG MAN, very grave and competent, with a chubby sunburned face and short fair hair. Before he arrived, Lester Beck regained consciousness and permitted Greerson and his father to help him to bed. He didn't speak, but always he watched his mother, who sat beside him, stroking his pale damp forehead murmuring soft maternal words of love and comfort. I stood by the bed while the doctor worked and I saw fear in Lester's eyes and a kind of blank bewilderment, and a wild yearning, as if he wished he were an embryo again safe in his mother's womb. I felt pity for Lester and was sorry I had slapped him, in spite of the beating he had given me by the little pines on the Greerson lawn, and in spite of the chilling memory of the shotgun in his hands.

He never took his gaze from his mother's face as the doctor examined him. He ignored the doctor and the rest of us; his mother was all that existed in the world for him, his only refuge, his last hope. And he never said a word. Not then, or in the hospital afterward. It was as if he'd lost the power of speech. He didn't even try to speak. Embryos don't speak, do they? Speech is proof that one belongs to the world, the wicked, dangerous world, and if one does not talk no harm can come. Lester became an embryo, curled in warm darkness, safe. His mother knew what her son felt. She didn't speak, either, but continued to gently stroke him and to croon loving sounds that only babies can understand. She went to the hospital, her arms around her son in the back seat of the doctor's car. Jack Greerson and Lester's father rode with them. I followed with Glenn Malone, Francine and Evelyn Greerson.

We called Corzetti and he came to the hospital. But Lester wouldn't talk, Corzetti shook his head hopelessly and gave up. We left the room and stood in the hospital corridor. A plainclothesman lounged against the wall outside Lester's door. He spoke to Corzetti. "Any luck, Sarge?"

Corzetti shook his head and said to me, "One of those things — killer

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with the brain of an infant. Right now he's in some sort of emotional block, a sort of protective trance. I've seen it before. Maybe he'll talk later, and maybe he won't. It would help if we had his gun, the one he used on Wingate, but it's not important now. He ditched it someplace — he's smart enough for that. I agree with you; it adds up. He was jealous of Wingate and killed him. He was jealous of Malone and tried to kill him, too. He hated you because you had slapped him and found him out. He almost killed you, too." He paused, and then said grimly, "Let's be thankful he didn't work it off by killing kids. They often do, you know."

"I know," I said. "What happens to him now?"

Corzetti shrugged. "State mental hospital. His father has signed the commitment papers — not that we need them. He won't burn in the chair."

"Then the Wingate case is closed?" I asked him.

He nodded. "As far as I'm concerned." He looked at me sharply. "You got any better ideas?"

I shook my head.

He nodded at the door. "He'll talk, don't worry — when I get him alone, without his mother there. I'll get a confession out of him." His lip curled.

I said, "So you took the tail off Francine Hopkins?"

He said, "Yeah — tonight. I needed the men, and the Captain said we could easily pick her up if she tried to skip . . . So she wouldn't go home with you to her mother?"

I shook my head again. I felt tired and washed out and kind of numb.

"Too bad," he said and held out a hand. "Well, thanks, Bennett. If you get to our town again, stop and see me."

I shook his hand and smiled and mumbled something. Corzetti spoke to the plain clothesman and went down the corridor. As I started to follow him, the plain clothesman grinned at me, nodded at the door to Lester's room and made a circling motion with a forefinger in the region of his forehead. "Batty, huh? Off his rocker?"

"Just a little," I said coldly. "Aren't we all?"

He stared at me uneasily as I walked away.

They were all waiting for me in a small lounge on the first floor; Jack Greerson, his wife, Francine Hopkins and Glenn Malone. Greerson asked at once, "Did he confess?"

I shook my head. "He won't say a word."

"But he killed Wingate," Greerson blurted. "He tried to kill you and Malone."

"I know," I said. "Sergeant Corzetti is certain he'll confess later."

Francine, standing with Malone's protective arm around her, said in her

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soft grave voice, "I feel sorry for Lester. I can't believe that he — he killed Johnny. I — I liked Lester and he liked me. He was so — so helpless, so —"

"Shut up." I was surprised at the harshness of my voice.

Evelyn Greerson went to her husband and touched his arm. "Take me home, Jack." She looked at Francine and said too brightly, "Are you staying with us tonight, Fran?"

Francine looked doubtful and gazed up at Malone. He smiled at her. "Go ahead. I'll see you tomorrow night."

"All right, Glenn. Thanks for — everything."

He leaned down, kissed her on the cheek, patted her again and crossed the room to shake hands with Greerson and me. "It's been quite a night, hasn't it?"

"Yes." Evelyn Greerson shivered a little. "I'm glad it's all over."

I said, "Francine, can I see you a moment?"

Evelyn Greerson said to her, "We'll wait for you outside." She took her husband's arm and left. Glenn Malone hesitated, glancing from Francine to me. Then he turned and followed the Greersons.

I said to Francine, "Have you changed your mind? Maybe there's still time."

Her lips trembled. "Why do you insist? I told you —"

"I think you want to see her," I said quickly. "I'll take you to Cleveland — right now. Maybe it's not too late."

She bit at her lower lip and her dark lashes were suddenly wet. "I — I do want to see her. I — I love her, but . . ."

"I know. Forget the past, Francine. It's the least you can do now."

She lowered her head and began to cry quietly. "All — all right. I'll go."

"Wait here." I started for the door.

I met Malone coming back in. I said to him, "I'm going to call Cleveland. If it's not too late, I'm taking Francine there."

He moved past me to Francine and put an arm around her. "I'm glad," he said softly. "It's the right thing to do."

I left them and went down the corridor to a phone booth and called Sandy Hollis' apartment in Cleveland. It wasn't until I heard her sleepy voice that I remembered the time and looked at my wrist watch. One o'clock in the morning. "Sandy, this is Jim."

"I know." She was suddenly wide awake. "What's wrong?"

"How is Mrs. Hopkins?"

"Very bad, Jim," she said soberly. "One of her lawyers called me at midnight to ask if I'd had any word from you about the daughter. He said Mrs. Hopkins would probably not last the night. Did you get my message this afternoon?"

"Yes. Where is she?"

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"At Lakeside Hospital."

"I'm starting now," I said. "The daughter's coming with me. Keep your fingers crossed."

I went back to the lounge. Glenn Malone was sitting on a divan beside Francine, holding one of her hands. She stood up as I entered. "Is she —?"

"She's still alive," I said shortly. "Ready?"

She nodded.

"I'll go with you," Malone said.

"No," I told him. "You go out and tell the Greersons that Francine isn't coming." I took Francine's arm and led her from the lounge and down the corridor.

Behind us Malone called, "I'll be waiting for you, Fran."

She didn't answer him. We took an elevator down to the emergency entrance in the rear where I'd left my car. I turned on the lights, saw that the tank was almost full. With Francine sitting silently beside me I drove up the cement ramp and out to the street, and headed north toward Cleveland.

I stood in a gleaming white corridor. Another hospital, the same hospital smells. Nurses swished past me and red lights flashed. Four o'clock in the morning, and here it was like noon. Opposite me Mrs. Noah Hopkins lay behind a closed door in a private room. I watched the door, waiting for Francine to come out, for anyone to come out and give me some news. A brisk nurse had taken Francine right in, but I did not know if it was to talk to Mrs. Hopkins, or to view her corpse. I couldn't even smoke. A sign said, *Oxygen — No Smoking.*

At a quarter past four a tall old man with white hair came out of the room and quietly closed the door. He was neatly dressed in a gray suit, black shoes and a sober blue tie. The prongs of a stethoscope protruded from one pocket of his coat. His handsome, lined old face was grave as he peered up and down the corridor. I went over to him. He turned his head and gazed at me with clear blue eyes.

"How is she?" I asked.

"Who are you, sir?"

"My name's Bennett. I brought Mrs. Hopkins' daughter from Columbus."

"I see," he said. "I'm Dr. Hart." He held out a hand. I took it. His clasp was dry and very firm. "Did you know Mrs. Hopkins?" he asked quietly.

"I've met her. You said, *Did* I know her, Doctor?"

He nodded, and sighed. "Yes. She's gone. Very peacefully, a few minutes ago."

I leaned against the wall and waited some more.

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It was daylight when I stumbled into bed, after leaving Francine Hopkins at the family home on Euclid Avenue in the care of the plump nurse, Miss Stanton, who had stayed on at the house after Mrs. Hopkins' removal to the hospital because, as she explained later, her salary had been paid until the end of the month. I had not asked Francine about her mother's will, since I considered it slightly indelicate to mention it so soon after her mother's death. But Miss Stanton had given me the name of Mrs. Hopkins' law firm and, tired as I was, I made a special point to set my alarm for nine o'clock. If Mrs. Hopkins had not left the family millions to Francine, and had not authorized my bonus, my trip to Columbus and the wild ride in the night back to Cleveland had been in vain.

The alarm jarred me from deep sleep. I was in the office a little before ten. Sandy was there, looking very fresh and pretty in a crisp white blouse and a pale blue skirt. Her brown hair was smoothly combed and parted on the side, and her brown eyes were lovely, very bright and clear. She kissed me lightly on the cheek. "Welcome home, Jim."

"I've only been gone a day."

"It seems longer than that." She touched my still swollen lower lip with soft fingers. "You're hurt, Jim."

"I'll live." I told her quickly about Mrs. Hopkins' death.

She said she was sorry, and added, "What kind of person is the daughter?"

"Francine? Oh, small and dark and cute — kind of moody and intense, though. Everything okay around here?"

"All under control, Jim?"

"Good girl." I patted her cheek. "Get me the outside wire." She went to her desk and I entered my office, picked up the phone there and called Mrs. Hopkins' law firm. I asked for Mr. Masterson.

He was in this time, but very guarded. Who was I? Whom did I represent? I identified myself, told him that I represented Mrs. Hopkins' daughter, and said, "Before Mrs. Hopkins died she employed me on a fee and expense basis, plus a bonus, if I brought her daughter home. To whom shall I send a bill?"

"To this office," he said. "We are the executors. All claims against the estate will be considered as soon as the will is probated."

"Thank you," I said. "I assume that Miss Hopkins will inherit?"

"Naturally," he said shortly.

I was surprised. "What do you mean by that? If Mrs. Hopkins' daughter had not arrived before her mother's death, she would have been cut off with nothing."

He laughed softly, almost a jeering sound. "Really, Mr. Bennett, don't be naïve. We wished to convey that thought to Miss Hopkins merely as pressure to get her to come home. Regardless of Miss Hopkins' rather — ah— questionable behavior, and apparent lack of regard for her mother,

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Mrs. Hopkins never intended to leave her out of the will. It would have been very unwise, legally. Miss Hopkins is an only child, and such a will could easily have been contested and broken."

"I see," I said coldly. "Then the daughter would have inherited the estate? Regardless of whether she arrived here before her mother's death?"

"That is substantially correct." It seemed to me there was faint amusement in his voice. "After all, Mr. Bennett, part of our fee was also contingent upon Miss Hopkins' return. We failed in that mission, but you succeeded — in the nick of time, I might add. Please accept the firm's official expression of thanks."

I muttered, "To hell with you," and hung up.

CHAPTER TWENTY

I WORKED AT MY DESK until noon and stayed until Sandy returned from lunch. At one o'clock I walked to my usual restaurant on East 9th Street and found Detective Sergeant Dennis Rockingham eating alone. He asked me to join him and when I sat down he grinned at me. "Jim, you look kind of beat up."

I touched my lower lip, which was still slightly swollen from Lester's blows. And thinking of Lester and my time in Columbus, I said, "Rock, I was beat up by a psycho-killer." I told him about it briefly, and he said thoughtfully, "It's pitiful. So your boy had a big crazy dream of love for the gal and killed the dance band guy to keep her from getting married?"

"Yes. And after we cornered him, he wouldn't say a word. Not even to his parents."

"That happens," Rockingham said. "Shock, something. Like an ostrich burying his head. Withdrawing from the cruel world, stuff like that. He may never talk again. I've seen that happen, too."

I grinned at him. "You're a regular psychiatrist, Rock."

"In my business you run up against a lot of things."

"In our business," I said.

"Private dick," he sneered. "Blah."

We changed the subject then and talked about the Cleveland Indians and their chances for the Series, and at two o'clock I returned to the office. Sandy was typing busily and said over her shoulder, "A couple of calls for you. They're on your desk."

I entered my office. The first call Sandy had written down was from a life-insurance salesman. I ignored it. Why should a bachelor have life

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insurance? The second was from Francine Hopkins. I called the penciled number.

I recognized the voice that answered; it was the plump nurse, Miss Stanton. "This is Mr. Bennett," I told her. "Miss Hopkins asked me to call her."

"Oh, yes. I'll —"

"Just a minute. How is she?"

She didn't answer for a moment, and then spoke in a lowered voice. "I can't tell how she is, exactly. She acts rather strange — depressed, and very nervous, but not actually grieving, if you know what I mean. She —"

"Is there an extension on this phone?" I broke in, because I'd heard a faint click on the wire.

"Yes. There's another phone upstairs, but —"

"Will you please tell Miss Hopkins that Mr. Bennett is calling?"

"What do you mean?" Miss Stanton's voice was puzzled. "You asked me how she was —"

Once more I cut in. "Call Miss Hopkins," I said firmly. "Now." I could picture Francine listening to our conversation on the upstairs phone, and I didn't want her to hear Miss Stanton's gossip — at least, not any more than she'd already heard.

"Well, all right." Miss Stanton was peeved. "Just a moment."

Presently Francine's soft voice said, "Hello, Mr. Bennett."

"Hello," I said, waiting for the click that would tell me Miss Stanton had hung up the downstairs phone. I didn't hear it, and knew she was listening, but there was nothing I could do about it.

"I — I want to see you," Francine said. "Could you come over?"

I hesitated. I still had work to do at the office, but decided it could wait, because I was curious, and because my Columbus episode was still fresh in my memory. "All right. When is your mother's funeral, Francine?"

"Monday." She sounded listless.

"If I can be of any help . . ."

"You're very kind, but all arrangements have been made by Dr. Hart. He's been our family physician for years. In fact, he brought me into the world."

"I see," I said, thinking that because of the curious and listening Miss Stanton I could not ask Francine what she wanted to see me about. "I'll be there in about an hour."

"I'll be waiting. Goodbye."

"Goodbye." There were two clicks on the wire, but I didn't know who had hung up first, Francine or Miss Stanton.

Traffic was thick down Euclid and it was three-thirty when I turned once more into the drive leading up to Mrs. Hopkins' house — Francine's house now — and stopped beneath the portico. Francine was sitting on the

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screened porch. She got up from a deck chair as I went up the steps and opened the screen door. "Thank you for coming," she said gravely. "Please sit down." I didn't see Miss Stanton, and wondered if she were lurking in the dusky hall just inside the front door.

I took off my hat, picked a chair close to the one Francine had been occupying, and sat down. She remained standing, clasping and unclasping her hands before her, and I thought that Miss Stanton had been correct; Francine appeared nervous indeed. I said gently, "Sit down, Francine."

She shook her head quickly.

"What did you want to see me about?"

"It's about — Lester Beck. I feel badly about him. What — what will they do to him?"

I shrugged. "Lock him up. Treat him. Give him tests, medical attention. They'll try to understand him, figure him out, but I'm afraid Lester will be locked up until he dies."

Her chin quivered. "But that — that's horrible."

"He killed Johnny Wingate," I said, watching her. "Remember, Francine?"

Her fingers worked more quickly, twining and untwining. "Yes," she said, "but . . ." Her gaze wavered away from mine.

"How do you feel about Johnny now?" I asked.

"I — I don't know. I loved him, and now it seems like a — a dream. He's gone and I don't feel anything. My mother's gone, too, and I still don't feel anything." She looked at me, and it seemed that her eyes were pleading. "What's wrong with me?" she cried. "Am I — abnormal?"

I stood up and went to her and placed my hands on her small round shoulders. I could feel her trembling. "Take it easy, Francine," I said softly. "You've just had too much in the last couple of days. You'll be all right."

She tilted her face up to mine. "Will I?"

I was a little shocked at the look of wild hopelessness in her eyes, but I touched her shoulder and said, "Sure. After your mother's funeral things will settle down, and you can decide what you want to do. I don't imagine you'll keep this big house, but —"

"I want to go back to Columbus," she said.

"And marry Glenn Malone?"

"I — I don't know. Should I?"

"That's for you to decide," I said, and thought, *You can really pick and choose now, honey. You're rich, young and pretty, and the big wide world is yours.*

She whirled. "Don't go."

"Why not?"

"I — I wanted to ask a favor, hire you, if I may. You see, Mr. Masterson

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and Miss Stanton told me who you really are — I thought you were just another lawyer. I'll see that you're paid and that you get the bonus Mother promised. Take me to Columbus now. I — I'm afraid to go alone."

"Afraid?"

She turned away and spoke in a low intense voice. "Johnny was killed there."

"Lester is locked up. What have you to fear?"

She swung and faced me. "Go with me, please — take me there. I must go, before the funeral. All of my things are there, at Mrs. Carewe's, my clothes, everything. And I want to see Jack — Mr. Greerson, and explain to him. And I promised Glenn — he'll be waiting for me. Then I'll come back here, and there will be Mother's funeral on Monday, and after that . . ." She paused. "After that, I — I'll see what I want to do. But I must see Mr. Greerson."

"Call him Jack," I said. "I don't mind."

Her gaze flicked away from mine, and once more her fingers began the twining and untwining, until the knuckles were white. I felt a small coldness in my brain, and a vague uneasiness. "All right, Francine. I'll take you to Columbus. Are you ready now?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

I HAD THE FEELING that everything was starting all over again. Once more I was driving the Cleveland-Columbus highway with Francine, this time in reverse, and at a considerably slower speed. I said, "Do you want to go to Mrs. Carewe's first?"

"No. Take me to Mr. Greerson's home."

"Jack's?" I murmured.

I was looking straight ahead, but from the corner of my right eye I saw her swing her head quickly toward me. I didn't even blink. "Yes," she said evenly. "To Jack's house. Do you mind?"

"What is he to you? Aside from an employer?"

"Nothing," she said in the same even voice. "Why do you ask?"

"Never mind now." We were in the traffic of High Street and I kept my gaze straight ahead. "You knew that Mrs. Greerson planned to take your place as her husband's secretary? That she had been secretly taking a business course?"

"Yes." Her voice was cool. "She wanted to surprise him."

"Are you going to marry Glenn Malone?"

"I don't know. Maybe I'll never marry anyone."

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"Not even Jack?"

"He's married." Her voice had risen a little. "His wife is my friend."

I stopped at a red light. She was answering my questions too freely, and the uneasy feeling was riding me hard. I didn't like the faint shrillness in her voice, like the thin edge of hysteria, but decided to push it a little anyhow. The light went green, and as I prodded the car forward, I said, "When you found Johnny Wingate he was still alive. Just before he died you said he mentioned a man's name — Jack — and something about a bush. Do you remember that?"

"Yes."

"Would you care to make any comment?"

"No. Lester killed Johnny. You said so." Her voice was growing shriller.

"Did Jack Greerson know Johnny? Had they ever met?"

"Not that I know of."

"But you did take him to meet Mrs. Greerson?"

"Yes."

"And you didn't see anyone back there behind the dance hall? No one?"

"No."

"Not Skippy Delane, nor Sally Valdez?"

"Who are they?"

"I think you know. Skippy worked for Johnny. He played the piano in the band and did the arranging. Sally sang for Johnny."

"Oh, those." A match flared as she lit another cigarette. "Why do you ask?"

I steered the Mercury around a parked delivery truck and coasted to a stop at another red light. We were well out on High now, and I was watching for the turn-off to Jack Greerson's house. I said, "Skippy might have wanted Johnny dead, so he could take over the band. Sally was jealous of Johnny, because he was going to marry you."

"Lester killed Johnny." Her voice was a queer sing-song.

I said, "Maybe he didn't. Francine, are you certain Johnny was already shot and dying when you found him?"

"Yes, yes, yes!" Suddenly she began to sob. "I — I don't want to talk about it. Please, please . . . " I looked at her. She was huddled forward, her face in her hands, and her small body was trembling.

I let her sob and tremble. At the next light I spotted the street leading to the suburban community where Jack Greerson lived and swung into it.

Francine Hopkins said in a small unsteady voice, "Why did you talk to me like that?"

I took a deep breath and didn't answer her. She came close against me and I felt her cool fingers on my cheek. "You're working for me, aren't you?" she said softly. "You know that Lester killed Johnny, don't you?" Her fingers moved down to my arm and pressed gently. I paid attention to my

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driving, but I could not ignore her closeness and the sudden pressure of her thigh against mine. The suggestive movement bewildered me; I could not immediately associate it with the grave and quiet Francine Hopkins. "Just forget it," she said in the same soft voice. "I'll double the bonus Mother promised you. Just leave me at Jack's house and forget it. Jack will drive me back to Cleveland, or Glenn will, and I'll tell Mr. Masterson to pay you right away." Her body moved against me.

Ahead I saw the lights of Jack Greerson's house, glowing behind the half-pulled drapes of the big window.

I slid from behind the wheel, hurried around the car and grabbed her as she started for the front door. She turned to stare up at me, her face a pale oval in the semi-darkness, and tried to jerk her arm from my grasp. I held in, and said angrily, "Listen, Francine; you asked me to bring you down here, because you were afraid to come alone. Now you're brushing me off, and that's all right, because you'll get a bill from me and you'd better see that it's paid. I've felt sorry for you and I've tried to help you, but I'm all finished feeling sorry and I want a couple of straight answers. I went to bat for you with the law, and if Lester didn't kill Johnny I'm way out on a big fat limb. What haven't you told me?"

She stared up at me in the gloom. Her lips worked silently.

I shook her arm. "Did you know that Johnny was having an affair with Sally Valdez, sleeping with her, right up to the time he was supposed to meet you? Did you know that, when you went to him?"

"No, no . . ."

I shook her arm harder, and her head jerked a little. "What's Greerson to you? Did he know Johnny? Talk, Francine. A poor half-wit is taking the rap for murder, and if you know anything —"

A lane of light hit my face. I looked up to see Jack Greerson standing in the doorway of his house, his big body looming tall and dark against the light. And then I saw his wife move up beside him. "Hello," Greerson called. "I thought I heard a car come in the drive." He came down the steps, peering, and then said over his shoulder to his wife, "It's Fran, honey — and Bennett."

I released Francine's arm. She moved quickly away from me and went to Greerson, who put an arm around her and said huskily, "Hi, Fran. How's your mother?"

Evelyn Greerson came down the steps. "Fran, we thought you might telephone us today, but this is much nicer." She smiled at me. "Hello, Mr. Bennett. This is a pleasant surprise."

I didn't answer. I was watching a car which had stopped at the curb. Its lights went out and a man crossed the lawn toward us. I should have remembered the car, but I didn't until Glenn Malone stood in the light from the doorway. He said cheerfully, "Hi, everyone," and went to Fran-

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cine. "I waited at Mrs. Carewe's house, and then I figured you might be over here."

Francine left Greerson and came against Malone. His arms went around her as she sobbed. "Mother's dead. I — I should have gone to her long ago . . ."

Malone patted her awkwardly and gazed at the rest of us with an embarrassed expression. Tonight he was hatless and was again wearing the belted coat he'd worn when I'd first met him in front of Mrs. Carewe's house, and once more I tried to think of the name for it, but I couldn't. I didn't wonder that he wore it, because the night was cool with a tang of fall in the air.

Jack Greerson said abruptly, "Well, come on in, everybody."

"But please be quiet," his wife cautioned with a smile. "The kids have just gone to bed." She went to Francine and touched her arm. "I'm sorry about your mother."

Francine said something in a low muffled voice, and the four of them moved toward the stoop. I stood still, feeling a sad and sudden loneliness. The prodding uneasy feeling I'd had since my first day here blossomed and burst, and the things I'd seen, and the unseen, too, were sickeningly clear in my brain at last.

And suddenly I heard myself say, "Wait — all of you."

I knew that Lester Beck had not killed Johnny Wingate.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

THEY TURNED SLOWLY TO FACE ME, two men and two women standing in the yellow lane of light, all of their faces showing surprise.

I tried to keep my voice steady. "I'm sorry for this, but I've got to call the police."

For a shocked instant no one spoke. Then Jack Greerson said in an ugly voice, "What is this, Bennett? A gag?"

I shook my head slowly.

Evelyn Greerson and Francine stared at me with almost identical expressions of mute, blank shock. Glenn Malone glanced at Greerson, his eyes worried, and put a protective arm around Francine. Greerson took a menacing step toward me. "Why the hell do you want to call the police?"

"To arrest the person who killed Johnny Wingate."

They all stared at me in the sudden shocked silence. Then Greerson said harshly, "What're you talking about? Lester killed him."

"No, he didn't," I said. "Please go inside — you and Francine and Mrs. Greerson." I looked at Malone. "You stay out here with me."

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"All right," he said quietly, still watching Greerson.

Greerson said, "To hell with you, Bennett. Get off my property. Now."

I shook my head.

"Then tell me what this silly business is about."

Evelyn Greerson touched his arm. "Do as he says, Jack. I — I'm sure he can explain it." She tried to pull him toward the steps.

He shook off her hand and came toward me, his right fist clenched. "You either explain now, or get out."

"I'll explain presently. Go inside, as I told you."

He swung his fist then, but I was expecting it. I ducked and came up under his arm and clipped him a glancing knuckle-burning blow across the jaw. He staggered a little, and the two women made sharp little sounds of fear. Then Greerson rushed me, and for a second I had my hands full. His fists pounded me and my foot slipped in the dew-wet grass. I had time to swing a right before I went down. He kicked me viciously in the side, and I heard Evelyn Greerson cry, "Jack! Stop that!" I rolled over, used an elbow to ward off another blow from Greerson's foot aimed at my face, and got to my knees. I was on my feet when he rushed me again, his head down, and I thought grimly that if he wanted to play rough I'd play rough, too. I lifted a foot and kicked him in the stomach. He gasped, faltered, and then came at me again. I braced myself, but he never reached me. Glenn Malone jumped forward, grabbed Greerson and twisted his arms behind his back. "Stop it," Malone said sharply. "Damn it, this is silly."

Greerson struggled, but Malone held him firmly, his jaw set in a tight line. Behind them Francine and Evelyn Greerson watched with wide eyes. "Thanks, Malone," I said, panting and rubbing my knuckles.

He didn't answer and continued to hold Greerson, who stopped struggling and glared at me. Malone waited a second, and then released Greerson, watching him narrowly. Greerson gazed at his wife, at Francine, and then at me. "I'm sorry," he muttered and turned toward the house.

"You should be, darling," his wife said in a brittle voice.

Greerson entered the house and the screen door closed softly behind him. Evelyn Greerson said, "I apologize for him, Mr. Bennett. But he's been drinking all evening, and —"

"It's all right," I told her. "Please go inside with him." I nodded at Francine. "You, too."

They hesitated, the two of them, and Francine's eyes were big and dark in her small pale face. Then Evelyn Greerson took her arm and led her up the steps. When the screen door closed behind them, I looked at Glenn Malone. He said quietly, "I don't know what you have in mind, but if I can help . . ."

"You've already helped me twice," I said. "Last night, if it had not been for you, Lester Beck would have killed me with a shotgun. Tonight you

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pulled Jack Greerson off me, and I thank you."

He shrugged and said carelessly, "Anyone would have done the same. Greerson is a little drunk, and that Lester character is a killer."

"No," I said. "Lester isn't a killer."

"But I thought . . .?"

"We all thought the same thing," I said harshly. "Lester was a natural. But he didn't kill Wingate."

"All right," Malone said in the same quiet voice. "Then I suppose you know who did kill him?"

I nodded slowly, watching him. "Yes, I know. It was you."

He didn't speak for a moment, but stood gazing at me. He was maybe ten feet away, standing on the grass beside the drive. He said in a puzzled voice, "I don't get it. You think I killed Wingate?"

"I know you killed him. I'm sorry, Malone."

He sighed and looked all around, at the empty street, the lawn, the house and then at me. "How do you know?" he asked in a calm, curious voice, as if he really wanted to know.

"I'll tell you at the police station. Do you want to come with me, or shall I call them to come and get you."

"I'd like to know now, if you don't mind," he said seriously. "You've made a — a shocking statement. I don't understand."

"You will," I told him. "Believe me, you will. You've got a job that maybe pays you four hundred a month, no more, and yet you have a dozen suits, drive a big new car. You're in serious debt, and the two-hundred dollar check you gave to Matthew Prosser bounced. The pressure is on and you need money badly, or the definite promise of money. That's why you wanted to marry Francine — to get your hands on the money she will inherit. It was your big chance, a chance you would not have with Johnny Wingate in the picture. Maybe you've even been dipping into the till at the finance company. If I'm wrong, I'll apologize. But I'm not wrong about this; you tried to establish an alibi by telling your landlord that your alarm clock was out of order and asking him to call you, because you wanted him to say that you were in your room at the time Johnny Wingate was killed. But you didn't go to bed that night — you sneaked out and went to Rainbow Terrace, just before Francine and I arrived. You lied about the clock — it was working when I was in your room yesterday morning. And —"

"Please," he broke in. "Please listen. I —"

"Shut up," I said. "There's more. You rigged the bullet holes in your car's windshield. You fired them yourself, to throw off suspicion, to make us think that Wingate's killer was after you, too. If you had been sitting in the car behind the wheel, as you said, the bullets would have hit you in the chest." I stopped, realizing that I was trembling a little.

"I saw the car coming," he said evenly. "Really, I saw a man leaning out

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the window with a gun, and I ducked sideways on the seat. The bullets missed me." He paused and sighed. "I was scared, I tell you. And I *was* in my room that night, in bed. My alarm clock keeps time, all right, but the alarm mechanism is broken. You're way off the beam, Bennett. I didn't even know that Wingate was the man Fran intended to marry. She didn't tell me his name — I told you that."

"But she did," I said, "and you lied to me. She told you all about him, who he was, what he did. You knew, all right. And you killed him."

When he didn't answer, I said, "Are you still carrying that gun?"

"Yes," he said from the shadows, "I am."

"Go for it, if you want to."

"That would be silly," he said quietly. "I have nothing to hide. You'd better go in and talk to Greerson. Fran told me he's crazy about her, how he argued against her marrying Wingate. If Lester didn't kill Wingate, Greerson did, because of Fran. He —"

"Wait," I said. "There's still more. Before Wingate died, he said two words to Francine. He didn't quite complete the second word, or else Francine didn't fully understand him, but he was trying to describe the person who shot him. I thought he was trying to tell Francine that the killer hid behind a bush at the dance hall, and that his name was Jack. I thought of Jack Greerson, of course. But it was you." I nodded at the jacket he was wearing. "You had on that same jacket the night Wingate was murdered. I didn't remember until tonight that it's called a bush jacket."

He stood very still, as if in deep thought. Then he said, "You can't prove any of it."

"I think we can," I told him. "For one thing, the bullets which killed Wingate will match your gun, the gun you say you're carrying right now. Anyhow, I think the police will be interested in talking to you. Shall we go?"

He tried to laugh, but it was a pitiful attempt. "Why should I go with you?"

"You'd better," I said, and suddenly I remembered what Sally Valdez had told me about the youth who had come up to the band platform and had given Wingate the message, the message that had sent him out to his death. "We have a witness," I lied.

"Witness?" His voice was sharp.

"Yes. A young man who was at the dance that night, the one you sent to Wingate to tell him that he was wanted outside, so that you could kill him. Perhaps you remember a kid with wavy blond hair, and wearing dark-rimmed glasses, a white dinner jacket and a maroon bow tie? We've found him, Malone, and he is ready to identify you as the man who sent him to ask Wingate to come outside." I stopped and waited, wondering if my trick had worked.

It had. It really got him. I heard him sigh raggedly, like the whisper of

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death, and he moved a little until he was out of the lane of light, until I couldn't see his face. Then he stood quietly, a tall dark figure, and he seemed to be waiting for something, maybe for a miracle that would save him.

I said softly, "Don't get any ideas, Malone. I've got a gun, too."

"I saved your life," he said desperately. "Remember, Bennett?"

"I remember," I said sadly, "and I've already thanked you. Go with me now, and I'll do what I can for you."

"And what would that be?" he said bitterly. "Life in the pen?"

"Then you confess?" I said quickly.

"No," he said from the darkness. "Can we make a deal, Bennett? Francine will marry me now, and I'll have money — a lot of it. Name your price."

"Sorry."

"Why not?" he asked shrilly. "Let Lester take the blame. He'll be locked up anyhow. They won't burn him in the chair. He has nothing to lose."

"Lester started life with three strikes against him, but he's not a murderer."

"What difference will it make to Lester?" Malone's voice was still shrill, almost womanish.

"None, I suppose. But it makes a difference to me."

"But he tried to kill you! I saved you!"

I held out a hand. "Give me your gun."

He didn't answer, and I saw the blur of movement as his hand darted to a pocket of his jacket. I got out my own gun then, but I was a little slow, and the crack of Malone's gun was flat and sharp in the night. I saw the streak of flame and felt the breath of death caress my face. I fired then, but he was turning and twisting and racing for the car at the curb, and I knew I had missed. I yelled at him hoarsely, telling him to stop, but he kept going. I waited a second, as long as I dared, feeling sick at what I had to do. He reached the car, turned and fired again. As he opened the door I fired. He stood for a moment, and then he slowly slid to the grass.

The door of Greerson's house burst open and the three of them came out to the stoop, Greerson in front, his wife and Francine behind him. They watched me silently as I moved over the grass to Glenn Malone lying beside the car at the curb. I knelt beside him, feeling the dread and the sadness that always came. His eyes were closed, but he was breathing, and I uttered a silent prayer of thanks. It's not an easy thing to kill a man, and Glenn Malone had saved my life. I couldn't tell where my bullet had hit him. I stood up straight and called harshly to the group on the stoop, "Call an ambulance — and the police."

It was past midnight when I left Jack Greerson's house. Francine changed her mind about staying there, and asked to return to Cleveland with me. I took her to Mrs. Carewe's and helped load her clothes and belongings into my car. By one o'clock in the morning the city was behind us and we were

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headed again toward Cleveland. My bullet had hit Malone low in the back but he would live, and he had signed a confession.

Francine sat quietly beside me, staring at the bright lane the headlights made on the dark road ahead. I said, "Not that it matters now, but you suspected Malone?"

"Yes," she said in a low voice. "When we were riding in his car yesterday afternoon I opened the dash compartment, looking for matches, I saw a gun there, and asked him about it. At first he was angry, and then he laughed and told me to forget it, that the gun belonged to the finance company . . ."

"What else?" I prompted gently.

"I couldn't forget what happened the evening before, when I told him I was going to marry Johnny. He acted kind of — of queer, and said he wouldn't let me, that he would kill Johnny first."

"And then," she went on, "when I saw him yesterday afternoon, he said he was sorry about Johnny and apologized for the way he'd acted, that he had not meant what he said about killing Johnny, that he had just been angry and jealous. But I couldn't forget the gun, and I — I didn't know what to do. I think now that he was afraid I'd tell the police about his threat, and that's why he stayed with me all afternoon and evening, to watch me. And he kept pleading with me to marry him. I finally said I would — it seemed the easiest thing to do, until I'd had a chance to think a little, and maybe talk to someone about it, maybe Jack and Evelyn Greerson. But I didn't have a good opportunity, and I was confused and scared — Johnny was dead, and you wanted me to go home to Mother, and then we all went to Lester's house, and Lester tried to kill you. I — I didn't know what to think then . . ." She began to tremble.

I reached over and touched her. "And today, when your mind began to clear a little, you wondered about Lester? And Malone? And after I brought you here, you got scared again and decided to buy me off, to keep me from snooping, so that —"

"Yes," she said quickly. "I wanted to talk to Jack and Evelyn first — tell them about Glenn, and see if we should go to the police. I didn't want poor Lester to be blamed, not if he was innocent."

"It would have helped if you had told me," I said reproachfully, and sighed. "Anyhow, it was a nice kiss."

"I — I'm sorry about — acting the way I did." She moved over until she sat close to me, and I put an arm around her. Gradually her trembling stopped, and she said, "It was such a — a shock about Glenn. Always before he was so kind, and considerate. And if it hadn't been for Johnny . . ."

"Yes," I said, "but Johnny was no good, either."

"I knew that," she said quietly. "I knew it all the time, when I ran away

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with him two years ago. I knew it when I promised to marry him. But I—I thought that Johnny needed me, that he would change."

"They never change," I said. "Not men like Johnny." I pulled her closer and kept my gaze on the road. "What's between you and Jack Greerson?"

"Nothing. We're just — friends," she said, after a moment.

"I saw him kissing you," I said.

"Yes. Jack seemed worried about something lately, and I was sorry to leave him. It was just a goodbye kiss, because I was grateful to him."

I let it go. It was none of my business.

After a while the girl beside me became still, and I looked down at her face cradled against me. She was sleeping quietly, her lips slightly parted. I had an odd, sad paternal feeling.

I turned on the radio and in a moment heard the closing strains of *Sweet Sue* rendered by a silk-smooth dance band. The tempo sounded familiar and I wondered if it was possibly a local broadcast. Then the music stopped and the voice of an announcer said, *We are bringing you from the network, direct from New York City, the music of Skippy Delane, who is opening an engagement in the Fountain Room of the King James Hotel. We might add that Skippy has taken over the band in the place of the famous and popular Johnny Wingate, who was tragically killed in Columbus, Ohio, two days ago. But it is the same smooth Wingate music, because Skippy was Johnny's pianist and arranger, and the band is still graced with the voice and distinctive style of the lovely Sally Valdez. These two, in the true spirit of the theater that the show must go on, have —*

I shut it off, thinking grimly that because they needed each other Sally and Skippy had gotten together after all, even after she had tried in spite to get him arrested for murder. Two talented people, hating each other, but willing to work together, eager to deal with the devil for their mutual gain.

I wished them luck.

THE END

An expanded, hard-cover version of "Catch a Killer", by Robert Martin, will soon be released by Dodd, Mead. The next thrilling issue of MMB-M will feature "Epitaph for a Virgin," by Robert Arthur (for details, see back cover). Use the coupon below to subscribe.

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MYSTERY PUZZLE: Garage Death

THE ROGERS HOME was set back from the road, and Inspector Goldsmith almost missed it. As he drove up the driveway, the well-kept lawn, still damp from last evening's drizzle, sparkled in the morning sunlight.

Mrs. Rogers met the Inspector on the doorstep, and led him directly to the two-car garage. Rogers' body lay on the garage floor, beside the open door of a convertible.

"When I found him, the only thing I could think of was to get him outside as soon as possible," Mrs. Rogers explained. "I stopped the engine and managed to drag him out of the car, but I couldn't get him any further."

The Inspector nodded understandingly. "Why don't you go on in the house, Mrs. Rogers," he said. "I'll look around here and be in to talk to you in a moment."

The large double door was closed; only the side door by which the Inspector had entered was open. In the convertible, a ring of keys dangled from the ignition, which was turned off. Inspector Goldsmith put his hand on the hood; it was warm.

Rogers' face was the cherry color characteristic of carbon monoxide poisoning, which the doctor had diagnosed. Rogers was fully dressed, in slacks, sport jacket, white shirt, tie, silk socks, Italian loafers, and belted, lightweight trenchcoat. His pockets contained wallet, handkerchief, cigarettes, silver lighter, pocket comb, keys, and a package of Lifesavers.

As the Inspector walked back to the house, he mopped his face. Even during the drizzle early last night, the heat they'd been having for the last three days had not abated.

Over a cup of coffee, Mrs. Rogers told the Inspector that her husband had taken her into the city to the night baseball game — which she had not enjoyed much in the wet. The game had been called after six innings, and they'd stopped for half an hour in a bar for a couple of drinks.

"Ed didn't seem particularly depressed," she said. "Of course, driving home from the city when the weather cleared and the stars came out, he swore at the umpires for calling the game. When we got home he wanted to watch the Late Show on TV. About 1, the phone rang and he answered. He came back into the living room very upset, and said he had to go right out. Before I could ask him what it was all about, he was gone."

"And that call, you think, took him somewhere where something happened that caused him to come home, close the garage doors, and sit in the car waiting for death."

Mrs. Rogers nodded.

"You may be right," Inspector Goldsmith said. "But before I can accept that theory, there are two inconsistencies I'd like to clear up."

What did the Inspector mean? For solution, *see page 103.*

— J. A. KRIPPER

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A beautiful coed is raped and murdered. Only one clue is found, and that so small that it is invisible to the naked eye. Here, Erle Stanley Gardner recounts how one tiny lead enabled the police to bring a murderer to justice.

THE CASE OF THE INVISIBLE CIRCLE

by Erle Stanley Gardner

ANY VETERAN INVESTIGATOR WILL tell you that it's very easy to overlook the most significant clue in a murder case.

I remember one such case where the most significant clue was a circle on the naked right hip of a beautiful young coed. This girl had been murdered in a sex crime.

The significant thing about that circle on her hip was that no one ever saw it.

That is literally true. The body was found lying on the snowy ground. It was naked from the waist down. Expert police officers and a skillful pathologist inspected the scene of the crime and the body. The body was later removed to a morgue where a careful autopsy was performed.

Yet no one of these trained observers saw that telltale circle. The reason they failed to see it was that it was invisible.

The question of how an invisible circle could become the most valuable clue in an entire case is a story in itself.

On November 11th, 1948, I was in New York City. I had just completed one of Captain Frances G. Lee's seminars on homicide investigation. These seminars are held in the Harvard Medical School in Boston, and immediately after the close of the seminar I had dashed to New York for a conference with my publisher.

It was just getting dark and I was about to go out to keep a dinner engagement when the phone rang. The City Editor of the Denver Post was on the line. He wanted me to fly out to Denver immediately so I could be there before daylight to work on the case of a murdered coed. After a brief talk I accepted the assignment and dashed out to catch the first available plane.

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The Denver Post also secured the services of Dr. LeMoyne Snyder, the famous medicolegal specialist, and the author of the book "Homicide Investigation."

As it turned out that murder case had all of the weird, bizarre facets one could well imagine. There were clues so utterly perplexing, there was a mystery so completely baffling that it would make the wildest fiction tale seem tame in comparison.

Dr. Snyder and I were commissioned by the newspaper to help the authorities. We looked up Hatfield Chilson, the district attorney, who was in charge of the case. We found him to be a shrewd lawyer, a competent investigator and, above all, a fair man. He wanted to prosecute the guilty party — but he wanted to be very, very certain that he didn't prosecute anyone who was innocent.

The facts were grim and stark. There were no real clues. On the evening of November 9th, the young coed had left a religious social gathering and started walking down the wind-swept street. She had never reached home.

Early the next morning a cattleman had found evidences of a terrific struggle in the snow at the border of his cattle ranch. There were strands of hair; there was a lot of bloodstained, trampled snow; there was a flashlight; there was a part which had been broken from a .45 automatic which had apparently been used as a club.

The cattleman had been suffering from the depredations of cattle rustlers and he naturally assumed that here was where someone had killed a calf and had dragged it into the automobile. The tracks unmistakably showed the dragging of a body and the tracks of a car which had driven away.

The next day the body of the missing coed was found some eleven miles away, down at the bottom of a snow-covered barranca where she had been dropped from a wooden bridge.

How had the body been transported to that place? Had it been in a truck, in a touring car, or in the trunk of a car? Had it been a one-man job, or had the body been held between two men in an upright position until it had been dumped from the bridge?

On the speedy answering of those questions a great deal depended. Were we looking for one man or two or more? What kind of a car had they been driving?

Photographs of the body had been taken and we asked to see those photographs.

I have said that Hatfield Chilson was a careful man and a thorough man. When we asked him for those photographs he studied them carefully before presenting them to us, and when he studied them he noticed for the first time this peculiar circle on the girl's hip.

I remember that we were at lunch when Chilson produced the

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photographs and said, "Now, gentlemen, there's something here which puzzles me. This photograph shows a circle on the girl's naked hip, yet every officer who saw that body knows there was no circle there."

It was Dr. Snyder who pointed out the significance of that circle. The camera film had been sensitive to certain rays of light which hadn't registered with the naked eye. That circle represented the beginning of a phenomena similar to that which investigators call "post-mortem lividity." It meant that the body of the coed must have been transported to that place in the trunk of an automobile, that the automobile had contained a spare tire on the *floor* of the automobile and the body had been dumped in on top of that spare tire. The rim around the hub had left that circle.

It is a privilege to work with a prosecutor of Chilson's fairness, intelligence and thoroughness. Slowly, bit by bit, he worked with the authorities and with us, piecing together the bits of evidence, listening to the technical advice that Dr. Snyder could give him and, above all, never once yielding to the clamor of public pressure, never once striking a pose or seeking publicity.

It is unfortunate that so few people realize the high character of lawyers generally. I doubt if more than a handful of people in Chilson's county had any real concept of the combination of ability and intellectual integrity which comprised Chilson's character.

Yet he is not at all unusual. Today there are thousands of district attorneys who can measure up to the highest standards.

Here was a country district attorney suddenly plunged into a challenging mystery, with the spotlight of publicity focused sharply on him. And he measured up to the responsibility.

As a citizen I only wish the bulk of the public could know more of the true character of the men who comprise the lawyers of this country of ours.

The publicity given the case was terrific.

Gene Lowall, at that time City Editor of the Denver Post, moved temporary headquarters out to a hotel at Boulder, Colorado. He had some fifteen trained reporters with him and he kept those reporters busy on assignments, co-ordinating their activities so they could be fitted into a pattern. We were, of course, all of us working at hectic speed and under the most trying conditions.

The authorities were forced to admit that they had run out of clues. After a week a move developed to try and curtail the front page publicity, but Hatfield Chilson sat tight. He felt sure that the assailant had received some injuries in the fight and he felt that by continually exerting pressure through the chan-

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nels of publicity someone would come forward with a key clue.

The reason the district attorney knew the man had probably been injured was because of Dr. Snyder's deductions in connection with that invisible circle on the dead girl's hip. Chilson felt reasonably certain that only one man had been involved in the crime. The evidences of a prolonged struggle indicated that the girl had put up a terrific battle for her life and her honor.

She was at the time wearing a class ring. Friends of hers said that the ring was so tight on her finger that she couldn't get it off. Yet when her assailant had tried to imprison her hands under her body on the cold frosty ground she had struggled so hard she had literally scraped the ring off and scraped ribbons of flesh from her fingers along with the ring.

The modern car usually carries the spare tire standing upright at one side of the trunk. Dr. Snyder felt that the murderer had used a car which had a big turtleback with the spare tire on the floor of the car.

Clues came in by the dozen—only they turned out not to be clues. There were numerous perplexing coincidences which can so easily throw an investigator off the track.

I personally became convinced the wounded murderer must have gone up a certain barranca to hide some of the girl's school books and personal belongings. I suggested to the district attorney that if this assumption was correct we would find drops of blood on the rocks, probably about every twenty feet apart.

Searchers were dispatched to that dry stream bed. Sure enough they found the drops of blood, a whole trail of drops, about twenty-two feet apart.

Dr. Snyder tested the bloodstains. They had been made by a wounded rabbit.

And then finally the steady, relentless pressure of publicity paid off. The wife of a man who lived only a few miles from where the body had been discovered came to the authorities in an almost hysterical state. She knew that her husband had committed the murder.

Neighbors told a very peculiar story. The day after the crime the suspect had washed his car inside and out. Then he had raised the turtleback of the car and had given that a good scrubbing. After that he had left the hose running in the car for hours and hours, washing it out thoroughly. Then he had dried the car, and when the interior of the turtleback was completely dry he had given it a good thick coating of red lead. Afterwards he had put on a second coating of red lead.

The gravel guard of chrome steel had been taken into the kitchen and scrubbed and scrubbed with a polisher until it shone like a mirror.

Yet Dr. Snyder had the answer to all that. He knew of certain

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scientific tests for the detection of bloodstains, tests so delicate that a cotton shirt stained with blood could be sent to a commercial laundry for seven successive times and the stain still be detected.

Officers who worked on the case told me they had never seen a car inspected for evidence the way Dr. Snyder inspected that car. He scraped away the red lead from around the bolts of the automobile, then with a wrench he carefully loosened those bolts and underneath the heads of the bolts he was able to find faint traces of blood.

He dug up the soil under the place where the automobile had been standing all the time the water was running out from the turtleback. In that soil he was able to find traces of blood. He was even able to find the telltale blood reaction on the car's polished gravel guard.

During the course of that investigation there were half a dozen false leads. There was one individual who could have been taken into custody and perhaps his entire life ruined. There were bizarre coincidences.

It was a pleasure to work with the district attorney who realized so thoroughly the responsibilities of his office, who marshalled such a deadly array of facts that the murderer was convicted despite the fact that his wife could not be called as a witness under the law of Colorado.

Yet the most important clue in the case was invisible to all human eyes. Only the lens of the camera and the super-sensitive panchromatic film picked up that circle on the girl's hip and enabled the authorities to deduce that the girl had been attacked by but one man. Knowing that fact, authorities deduced that in the terrific struggle which had ensued this man had probably been injured.

That invisible circle was really the key clue in the case.

Solution to Mystery Puzzle on page 98

Inspector Goldsmith thought it strange that Rogers should have one ring of keys in the ignition, and another set in his pocket. Quite possibly there was an explanation — the Inspector wanted to know what it was. More strange, he thought, was that Rogers, on a hot night when the weather had cleared, should put on a trenchcoat when he went out. Under questioning, Mrs. Rogers admitted that they had stayed in the bar much longer than half an hour, and that Rogers had gotten quite drunk. She had driven home, using her keys. Rogers had passed out when they arrived home, and she had left him in the car with the engine running. Her motive was a large insurance policy and another man.

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Burton Abbott was convicted of kidnapping and murder in one of the most sensational and controversial trials in California history. He is now in Death Row in San Quentin — still protesting his innocence. Conflicting stories by witnesses and Abbott's own physical frailty lend credence to his story. Yet overwhelming circumstantial evidence stands against him. Miriam Allen deFord discusses the pros and cons and she feels that there will always be . . .

THE LINGERING DOUBT

by Miriam Allen deFord

WHEN SEVEN MEN AND FIVE WOMEN of at least average intelligence and far more than average sense of duty bring in a verdict of guilty after six full days of deliberation, the overwhelming presumption is that the convicted man committed the crime of which he was accused.

And yet, to one who studies carefully the case of Burton Abbott, now awaiting execution in San Quentin for the kidnapping and murder of Stephanie Bryan, there remains still a faint, lingering doubt.

Not because the evidence was entirely circumstantial; it is a common fallacy that circumstantial evidence is less cogent than that of eyewitnesses — who all too often are confused, forgetful, or honestly mistaken. But the two important figures in a murder are the murderer and his victim. And in this case, the two just don't fit.

This story could be written in two parallel columns, each describing Burton Abbott, with evidence to support each description. And they would be entirely contradictory.

Here is one Burton Abbott: He is a rather ordinary young man, a bit spoiled and babied, perhaps, by an adoring mother and wife. He is a war veteran who while he was stationed at a camp in Kentucky suffered double pneumonia which awoke a latent tuberculosis. All of one lung and five of his ribs have been removed, and he has a scar on his back as big as a man's hand. Later an abscess developed on his chest, which became infected. His brother Mark said, "He is still in constant pain, and is so weak that he can't lift his four-year-old son." His wife added that he has trouble in breathing. He is slight and skinny, weighing 130 pounds. He spent two years in a hospital, and has a big disability

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pension. He became a student in accounting at the University of California, under the GI bill. With his mother, his wife and baby he lived in a one-story stucco house in a conventional suburb. All the glimpses of him are commonplace — he is driving his Chevvy, he is attending classes, he is having his bi-weekly check-up at the hospital, he is dropping in at a popular student hangout to munch doughnuts, he is visiting the beauty parlor where his wife is employed. The only recreation he is physically able to take is an occasional fishing trip in the mountains of northern California, where the family owns a cabin. "Bud is gentle and kind and good," says his wife, and his brother echoes, "Bud was always a gentle kid. He never was rugged and never got real mad. He was easy-going and never tempery. Everybody likes Bud."

Then there is another Burton Abbott, the one the prosecution called a constitutional psychopath, with "an infantile personality compatible with this sort of crime." This Burton Abbott is a "forceful, active, dynamic" person, feeling and showing no emotion except for himself; he talks too loud and makes too many gestures; his usually calm demeanor is due not to modesty or to stoicism but to frigid cynicism. Moreover, his physical condition is far better than he would like to have people think. He tried to be readmitted to the veterans' hospital "to bolster up his contention that he could not have committed the murder." The doctors gave him a complete examination, and they were amazed to find his condition "almost that of a normal nontuberculous male." And the same brother who told of the draining infection and the pain that kept him from sleeping also pictured him as an ardent hiker in rough country who was "able to participate in all normal outdoor pursuits" — though he couldn't lift a four-year-old child.

Unless one posits a homicidal maniac, which nobody has suggested, there is only one possible motive for the kidnapping and murder of a 14-year-old girl and the secret burial of her body, and that is a sexual one. "If ever there was a crime that fitted the punishment of death," said Assistant District Attorney Folger Emerson of Alameda County, "this is it. Stephanie Bryan's body was too decomposed to tell whether or not she was violated, but the evidence shows that the original intent of the defendant when he kidnapped her was to commit a sex crime. In all probability he raped her." Obviously, if he did, she was killed to keep her from talking.

But people do not suddenly develop overpowering aggressive sexual impulses. Though Georgia Abbott declared that "no woman could ask any more in a husband," she said frankly that "since his lung operation he has not been highly sexed." To put it crudely, she im-

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plied he wasn't much good in bed any more. (There seems to be some foundation for the popular legend that tuberculosis victims are often easily aroused sexually; perhaps the constant low fever stimulates the gonads as well as the other endocrine glands. But this is not necessarily universal.) And Abbott is no sex-starved wolf; he has an extremely personable red-haired wife, attractive enough to arouse the envy of less fortunate husbands, and one who insists that there was "no incompatability between us of any kind."

In a case like this, which has aroused wide local interest, there is always a crop of unverified rumors, passed around by word of mouth. Some of them are grotesque, some silly. One that has come up frequently in the Abbott case is that he had been caught before, following women on the street and "luring children into his car," and even that he had been picked up by the police — four times is the usual statement — for molesting women, and then let go and the matter hushed.

To begin with that rumor is highly dubious. The police of Berkeley are famous as the "college cops," trained by the late great August Vollmer; they are not corrupt and they do not hush up matters of that kind. Even if they did, the Abbotts don't have that sort of influence. The prosecution was savage and brutal in its attacks on the defendant; had there been the slightest truth in such an accusation, District Attorney J. Frank Coakley, who prosecuted, would have ferreted it out and hammered away at it.

One Berkeley housewife earned a headline by "identifying" Abbott as a man who had followed her and tried to flirt with her three years before. Abbott was then 24 and she was 38; it sounds unlikely. And he retorted indignantly: "She is absolutely false. I can't explain how she could have said such a thing. I'm not in the habit of following women. I'm married and have a son." Asked if he had ever followed any woman, he snapped: "Yes — my wife."

The congenital psychopath — what used to be called the moral imbecile — is a recognizable psychological type; Leopold and Loeb are good examples. Such a man may be — often is — of high mentality, but he is arrested emotionally at the infantile level, and like an infant acknowledges no interest but self-interest and no law but his own will. Nothing in Abbott's behavior has suggested that he is so constituted. He did, during most of his trail, display the poker face, the unmoved calm, which resembles the deadpan arrogant mask of the psychopath. "There is no reason to be immature and jump up and down and yell," he told a reporter. "After all, I've spent several years in the hospital and have learned to keep myself under control while looking death in the eye." That calm has been broken many times. When for

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the first time in seven years he was apart from his wife on her birthday, he begged his lawyer to "please tell her I'm thinking about her." He worries about his mother and his brother. The baby-sitter described at the trial how he kissed his little son goodbye as he left home on the morning of the murder: "He put his arms around him and told him to be a good boy."

He has never ceased to maintain his innocence, from the moment of his arrest when he told his attorney, with tears in his eyes, "All I want to say is that I didn't do this." While he still hoped for acquittal, and for a chance to return to a free life, he added that even so, "If they don't catch the guilty person, there will always be some doubt about me in the minds of some people." In another interview he told a reporter: "Each night as I lie on my jail cell bunk, I pray that the person that did this thing gets caught. I've never been an overly religious person. But a situation like this makes you definitely more thoughtful." And when the verdict was brought in, all he said was: "I guess the jurors feel they're correct, but they're wrong, that's all there is to it. They're wrong, wrong, wrong."

Only a skilled actor could keep up such a pose for seven months, and Burton Abbott is no actor. And that is not the picture of a typical constitutional psychopath.

So here are the two Burton Abbotts, and you can take your choice. But in a murder there are always two persons concerned. And so we come to the completely unlikely portrait of Stephanie Bryan in the role of murderee.

There is only one Stephanie. She was 14 years old, just beginning to reach puberty. She was nice-looking, but not markedly pretty; she had had eczema and her skin was bad. She was abnormally shy and timid, so self-conscious her teachers hesitated to make her recite in class, though she was an honor student, so reserved it was six months before she let her piano teacher drive her home after her lessons. Willard Junior High School in Berkeley is full of bobby-soxers and precocious coquettes, but Stephanie was not of their number. She had been carefully reared in a quiet, upper middle class home, and she was docile and retiring. She and her three younger sisters and her little brother were rather over-protected by anxious parents; her physician father, a radiologist in an Oakland hospital, drove them all to school in the morning, and their mother laid out the exact path by which they were to return and watched for them or met them and walked part way with them. Stephanie was the last girl in the world to enter a stranger's car voluntarily, or even to speak to a man who had accosted her.

Still, she *was* kidnapped and she *was* murdered. Unless she was dragged bodily into a car, in broad daylight, in an unpropitious and

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frequented place, it is hard to see how the crime was accomplished. And even if fear and desperation lent Burton Abbott the strength later on to dispose of her body, it is hard to see him, under such circumstances, overpowering a struggling girl who weighed only 25 pounds less than he did.

The little that is known of what happened to her is soon told. Stephanie started home from school about 3.30 on the afternoon of April 28, 1955. She was accompanied by a classmate, with whom she stopped at a pet shop to buy a book on parakeets, at the public library for two teen-age novels, and at the doughnut shop for refreshments. They parted near the Claremont Hotel tennis courts, where her regular short cut led directly to the street on which she lived. She was never seen alive again.

The Claremont, though it is a luxury hotel, and is a center of social life in Berkeley, belongs architecturally to a bygone age; it is almost the last of the huge, ornate, turreted and jigsawed white wooden resort hotels which once dotted the California scene. It stands high on a hill, surrounded by many acres of beautifully landscaped grounds and gardens. The tennis courts are at the bottom of the hill, near the tracks of the electric trains which cross the Bay Bridge to San Francisco. Nearby residents, including schoolchildren, are accustomed to using the paths and byways of the Claremont grounds as short cuts to their homes.

When Stephanie had not appeared by 4:15, her mother began to worry. She retraced the route her daughter should have taken, all the way to the deserted school, and returned home to find Stephanie still not there. When Dr. Bryan came home around 5:30, they began phoning the girl's friends. (They missed the one she had been with.) At 6:15 her father reported her to the police as missing. She was unfailingly punctual and reliable, and would never have remained away voluntarily without letting them know.

Eight days went by without a clue. Dr. Bryan posted a $2500 reward. The Berkeley police and the sheriffs of neighboring counties searched the hills without the slightest result. The first break came on May 6, when a man turned over to the police a French textbook he had found in a field in Contra Costa County, east and north of Berkeley. He had given it to his son, a high school student, after throwing away the soiled paper cover; then he read about the search for Stephanie Bryan and turned it in. There were no fingerprints, but it was the text she had used.

Then, on the evening of July 15, the case exploded.

Georgia Abbott sometimes took part in amateur theatricals. In the unfinished basement adjoining the garage in their house in Alameda, the Abbotts stored boxes of old clothes and all the outworn junk

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people used to keep in their attics when there were attics; and she went down there to hunt up some things for a theatrical costume. In a carton she ran across a red leather handbag she did not recognize. She opened it, and in a wallet inside she found identification papers, photographs, and an unfinished letter, all belonging to Stephanie Bryan. She dashed upstairs with it.

Visiting them that evening was Otto Dezman, the husband of Georgia's employer, Leona Dezman. Until the middle of the trial, when Mrs. Dezman's testimony damaged Burton Abbott's alibi, the four had been intimate friends. Then they quarreled bitterly, and Leona fired Georgia.

"Isn't this the girl who disappeared?" Mrs. Abbott asked excitedly.

It was Dezman who called the police, but they all acquiesced willingly. Everyone agrees that Abbott was bewildered, not frightened; after an officer had come and gone, he and Dezman played chess quietly for hours.

One point that has never been cleared up satisfactorily is that Elsie Abbott, Burton's mother, had already found that purse — or *a* purse — in May, and had thrown it back in another box without thinking to inspect or mention it. But she insists it was not the same one — that the one she found was larger. If so, no one has discovered the other one.

So far, the police had arrested nobody. But they did immediately dig up the garden and fine-comb the basement. In the former they found nothing, in the latter — plenty. Loosely concealed in the dirt wall were schoolbooks, notebooks, the two library books, the book on parakeets, Stephanie's eyeglasses, and a brassiere identified as hers — her very first to fit a developing bust.

The Abbotts professed themselves completely stymied. All they could offer by way of an explanation was that their garage had been used in May as a polling place in an election, and that anyone coming in to vote would have had easy access to the basement. The police took a dim view of the idea of a voter, his pockets stuffed with a dead girl's belongings, casting his ballot and then nonchalantly hiding the evidence of a murder.

But — omitting the possibility of any such far-fetched performance — it is one of the major puzzles in this baffling case why, if Abbott is guilty, he, or anyone in his senses, would bury a murder victim some 300 miles away and then bring her property back to his own house and leave it where the slightest search would uncover it. One theory is that Abbott intended to scatter the objects in various spots around the Bay Area, so as to confuse the authorities, and that the French book was the first of these projected hare-and-hounds hunts. But if that were his plan, he had plenty of time and

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opportunity to go on with it, and nothing else ever was found.

Abbott was still not held, but the police wanted to know in detail where he was and what he was doing on April 28.

He offered a complete alibi. He said he had driven up from Alameda to the cabin in Trinity County that morning, for the opening of the fishing season the next day, and that it was therefore physically impossible for him to have been in Berkeley at the hour when Stephanie was last seen. That alibi was his sole defense in the trial, and witnesses both upheld and upset it.

Naturally the next move was to search the vicinity of the cabin. On the night of July 20 the two dogs of a local "bear and bobcat hunter" located a shallow grave on a very steep hillside 335 feet above the cabin. In it lay what was left of the pitiful corpse, the arms thrown defensively over the head. Bears and other wild animals had been at it, it had been snowed and rained on, it was dreadfully decomposed and quite unrecognizable. But it wore Stephanie's clothes which she had worn on April 28.

Her panties were tied loosely around her neck, and she had been either gagged or garotted with them; but what killed her was a series of savage blows on the skull with some heavy instrument.

If Burton Abbott is the frail person his appearance and his medical history make him seem to be, it can be doubted if he could possibly have climbed that snow-covered hill, in the thin mountain air, carrying the dead weight of a 105-pound body, and then dug a grave there, filled it up, and climbed down the mountainside again. A husky man who has hunted in that territory told me he himself did not think he could have accomplished it.

The logical rejoinder was that he didn't; that Stephanie was still alive and had climbed up there with her captor, to be killed and buried where she fell. That seems to me inherently absurd; I cannot imagine anything that could have induced or forced her, if she were conscious, to make that journey — and if she were unconscious it would have been just as hard to drag her there as if she were dead. And it would have taken an imbecile, not an intelligent man like Burton Abbott, to devise such a stupid plan of murder.

After the discovery and identification of the body, Abbott was at once arrested. He had already taken a lie test at his own request, and been examined by psychiatrists. The psychiatrists pronounced him sane; the lie test was called "inconclusive."

He was indicted by the grand jury, and held in the Alameda County jail in Oakland until his trial began on November 7.

The trial lasted until January 19, 1956, when the case went to the jury. They announced their verdict on January 25, after intensive study

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of the evidence, with no ballots taken till the end. Judge Charles Wade Snook was eminently fair. District Attorney Coakley was ferocious in cross-examination, especially of Abbott himself, and violent in his speeches, but he took no unjust advantages and engaged in no snide tricks. Abbott had two extremely competent attorneys, Stanley Whitney and Harold Hove, who defended him ably and aggressively. Whitney is a former city attorney of Alameda, and Hove is an Alameda city councilman and an ex-FBI agent. The jury was remarkably conscientious. Abbott had, and still has, every protection of the law.

Every minute of his alibi was considered. There were witnesses who testified that they had seen him in Berkeley on the afternoon of April 28, and other witnesses who testified that they had seen him 200 miles away at the same time, and all were apparently honest, though one set must have been wrong. He claimed to have stopped enroute at restaurants in Corning and in Wildwood, near the cabin; the owner of the first place disproved it, that of the second, who knew him well, could not remember: but the owner of a third restaurant he said he visited, in Redding, produced records to back him up. He spent nine hours on April 29 in the Wildwood bar, drinking and talking with a casual acquaintance; the implication was that he, who was usually a very light drinker, had been getting drunk to forget what had happened the day before. But the man who spent those hours with him — an unexpected graduate in philosophy of the University of Chicago marooned in lumberjack country — testified that Abbott did *not* become drunk, that they discussed books and music, that "he expressed nothing that was neurotic, anti-social, or vicious."

There was one other kind of testimony, both before the grand jury and at the trial. That came from three different sources, people who testified that while driving along a road near Berkeley on the afternoon of April 28 they had seen a terrified girl in a car with a man who struck her down when she tried to scream for help. They had various excuses for having done nothing about it. None of them could swear the man was Abbott.

Abbott testified at length in his own behalf, and Coakley could not break down his protestation of innocence. He did confess to various minor mistruths, some in his statements to the police, some dating back to his army enlistment, but they were the lies of a defensive man trying to evade argument, not those of a shrewd criminal covering his tracks.

The prosecution itself acknowledged that there was no direct evidence against him. But there was one kind of indirect and damning evidence, which in the end undoubtedly convicted him. That was the testimony of Dr. Paul L. Kirk, head

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of the criminological department of the University of California.

Dealing with microscopic fibers and hairs, taken from Abbott's car, Kirk compared them with fibers from Stephanie's sweater and hairs from her head. He compared tiny bits of earth and gravel and clay from Abbott's boots with the soil at the grave-site. In all cases they matched. There were pinpoints of stain in Abbott's Chevrolet, too, sunk deep in and hard to find, that were found to be blood — though they could not be proved to be Stephanie's blood.

The defense brought in another expert, Lowell Bradford, who disputed Kirk's findings, and endeavored to show that fibers and hair and earth could all have come from other, non-incriminating sources. But the jury believed Kirk.

Abbott was found guilty on both counts, without recommendation to mercy, and was sentenced to the lethal gas chamber. According to California law, appeal is automatic in capital sentences, and at this writing Abbott is in the death row in San Quentin, awaiting the outcome of that appeal.

The Bryans have not yet been able to hold their little girl's funeral. Her mutilated remains are still held in a mortuary in Redding. In the Bryan home "we never speak of Stephanie to the other children." But her father, when he got the news of Abbott's conviction, cried, "The gas chamber isn't enough punishment for him!" They are trying to give their children a normal existence, to face life again themselves. But there is a gap that will never be filled, and a bitterness that will never be sated.

Elsie and Georgia Abbott are deeply estranged, each subconsciously blaming the other for not protecting enough the man they both so love. Little Chris Abbott, who thinks his father is back in the hospital, was the object of an anonymous death-threat, and had to be guarded by the same FBI that helped to bring evidence against his father. Mark Abbott and his mother, who work in the same large office, must face daily the pity or the avoidance of their fellow-workers.

So there the case stands now. One of two things must be true. Either Burton Abbott is guilty, or he is the victim of the most complicated, boldest, and luckiest frameup on record. Coincidence is out of the question — coincidences like finding a murdered girl's belongings in a man's house and the body of the girl near the same man's mountain cabin simply don't occur. Abbott himself says that since he knows he is innocent he must have been framed, but why or by whom he cannot, or will not, say.

The vast probability is that Abbott is guilty as charged.

But in this confused, puzzling, and contradictory case there will always be that last lingering, wondering doubt.

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Lovely Brenda Delmar was a brassiere model and she had all she wanted; money, a plush apartment, plenty of boy friends. . . . But when they found her in bed, clad in a slip and smelling of cyanide, it looked like suicide. Then Dr. Standish noticed a clue that proved otherwise. Mr. Coxe here spins one of his most exciting yarns, where . . .

MURDER MAKES A DIFFERENCE

by George Harmon Coxe

THE THURSDAY NIGHT CROWD WHICH had turned out to see *Bright Harvest* in its final week, filled the lobby of the Lyceum quickly after the second act curtain and Doctor Standish smiled proudly about him as he brought out cigarettes.

There was a fine glow of expansiveness inside him, standing there with Louise Allison, knowing she was his girl. He liked the way people looked at her, the way their glances approved of her upswept blonde hair and radiant skin and cool fragile beauty.

The dress may have helped this approval, with its sleek black simplicity, and the mink jacket may have influenced the overall impression, but Paul Standish was interested mostly in the way her eyes smiled and the music in her voice as she chatted on about the play. For perhaps thirty seconds the glow he felt was warm and bright; then he saw Barry Corwin. So did Louise.

"There's Barry," she said. "Barry . . . you're not just getting here?"

"Hello," Barry Corwin said, and grinned. "Had to work on a thing."

He shrugged out of a covert-cloth topcoat, and that left him smoothly handsome in a double-breasted suit of dark gray, faultlessly tailored. He took the girl's hand and held it, and Standish, missing nothing, decided sourly that M-G-M could have cast him just as he stood as a successful young advertising man. Which he was. The Corwin Studios — Say It With Photographs.

"What a shame," Louise said.

"How's the show?" Corwin said. "Any point in seeing the third act when you don't know what the first two are about?"

Paul Standish didn't hear Louise's reply, for just then he glanced towards the sidewalk and saw a solid-looking man in a blue coat start through the crowd, his glance sweeping the lobby.

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Standish turned quickly, his spirits diving and despair settling in. *Oh, no!* he prayed. *Not tonight, Lieutenant. This is my night for fun. I promised Louise.*

He kept his glance averted and listened to Louise and Barry. He drew his neck in, like a turtle sensing trouble, and waited helplessly, asking only for justice. Seconds later a hand touched his arm.

A quiet voice said, "See you a minute, Doc?" and then Standish turned and looked into Lieutenant Ballard's keen grey eyes, and knew there was no justice.

Ballard lifted his hat. "Hello, Miss Allison."

"Now really, lieutenant." The music had gone out of the girl's voice, leaving it cool, annoyed. "Don't tell me you've found another body."

Ballard colored and his voice was embarrassed. "I'm sorry."

Standish sighed. He shrugged. He put on a half-hearted smile and tried to sound casual.

"Be back in a minute, darling," he said and went with Ballard to the edge of the crowd.

"The James apartments on Oak Street," Ballard said. "A suicide. A dame . . . The sergeant says it's cyanide."

Paul Standish stood there a silent moment, a lean, straight-backed man with a clean-jawed bony face and dark wavy hair. Somehow, seeing Ballard move into the crowd, he had known that something like this would happen. He knew, too, that it was not Ballard's fault but that did not help his own mood.

"Fine," he said. "Great. Of course you had to find her now."

There may have been a veiled smile in Ballard's eyes, because he understood how it was with young Doctor Standish, but nothing showed in his face. He said:

"You're the acting medical examiner. We can't move her until you say so."

Standish nodded; then he offered a reluctant, twisted smile to show his resentment wasn't personal. "Yes," he said. "Okay, Tom."

Louise was waiting with Barry Corwin as the lights in the lobby blinked to warn the smokers it was curtain time.

"Look, honey," Standish began.

"I know," Louise said, her glance cool. "You have to go."

"I won't be long," Standish said. "I'll be back by the time the show is over."

"Say, that's too bad," Corwin said, his grin belying his words. "Tell you what. Since you're not going to be here I'll use your seat. Then Louise can be telling me about the first two acts."

"If we should miss you," Louise said, "we'll be at the *Blue Parrot*." . . .

The James apartments was an imposing beige-brick building with a marquee over the entrance and a lobby switchboard, attended by a sallow-faced youth who told Ballard

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where to go. The apartment he wanted was on the fourth floor and when Standish followed the lieutenant through the door he was vaguely aware that there were three men in the room, but he saw first the in-a-door bed and the woman who lay there, clad in a slip and a black, maribou-trimmed negligee.

A blocky, blunt-jawed man sitting on a chair arm said, "Hi, Doc."

Standish said hello to Sergeant Kane from Station 5, nodded to a plain-clothesman he did not know. A third man stood up.

"You're Doctor Standish, aren't you?"

"This is Mr. Fielding," Kane said.

Ballard acknowledged the introduction. So did Standish, finding Fielding a stout, balding man, neatly dressed in a brown Shetland that looked imported.

"Mr. Fielding found her," Kane said. "The kid on the switchboard downstairs came up with him and unlocked the door when she didn't answer her phone."

Standish went over to the bed, seeing now something familiar about the girl who lay there, a slimly voluptuous girl, tall, and well proportioned. Her hair was red and he knew that in life she would have the milk-white complexion that so often went with that hair; now there was a marked cyanosis of the face and neck and, on one cheek, a faint, off-color mark.

"Who was she, Mr. Fielding?" Ballard said.

"Brenda Delmar," Fielding said. "She was a model. Worked for Corwin Studios."

Paul Standish, in the act of bending over the body, straightened. Then, listening to Fielding's story, remembered things came back and he knew why the girl seemed familiar.

The Corwin Studios specialized in advertising photographs and in most of these there was a girl. Not merely in a decorative sense to glamorize some prosaic product, but as models for a product. For here in Union City were two companies making women's foundation garments, and another which made underwear. As a result Corwin illustrations and Corwin girls could be seen in any women's fashion magazine; Corwin girls in bras and panties, in nightgowns and pajamas, in corsets and girdles and slips.

Arthur Fielding managed one of these companies which his wife had inherited — The NuForm Company. And Nu-Form was a client of Corwin's. All of which added up to make the dead girl familiar to Standish. He had seen her with Corwin in restaurants and night clubs, and he had sometimes wondered how it would be to have a business in which pretty girls were part of the stock in trade.

"She used to work in some dress shop here in town," Fielding was saying, "and Corwin spotted her and put her to work posing for underwear. She was out to our place

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several times to model our line; that's how I got to know her."

Paul Standish bent over the dead girl. She was lying on her back and he was at once aware of the odor of bitter almonds that came from her mouth as he took her head in his hands and moved it gently, testing the *rigor*. He did the same with the arms, experimented with the knees. Then, as he examined the hands, he saw that on the right one the pointed tip of the red-painted nail had been torn from the middle finger.

He straightened finally and glanced at the glass on the table beside the nail-polishing kit. There was an inch or so of liquid in the glass and without touching it he leaned over and sniffed, smelling the whisky and again the unmistakable odor of cyanide.

Arthur Fielding was still talking when Standish finished calling the morgue. Brenda Delmar, Fielding explained, had phoned him in the afternoon and said she wanted to see him. She would not tell him why. He did not know whether she sounded distraught or not; she may have. He did know that she was divorcing her husband, a lieutenant in the army, who had returned from overseas the day before.

"I don't know if that had anything to do with it or not," he said. "I told her I'd be tied up until nine thirty or so but she said she'd wait. When I came I had the boy downstairs call her. He didn't get any answer but he said he was pretty sure she was in, so we came up to see if anything was wrong." He shrugged and took a handkerchief from his breast pocket. . . .

When Fielding went, Sergeant Kane went downstairs to question the clerk on the switchboard about the soldier husband. Ballard moved over to the table next to the bed and sniffed of the glass. "No doubt about the cyanide, is there?"

Standish shook his head and moved about the room. He saw then that there was a small kitchen beyond the dinette and when he strolled out there he saw the half-filled bottle of whisky. He came back and moved into the dressing room connecting the bath. There were two big closets here and he opened them, glancing at the long rows of dresses, the line of shoes on the rack on the floor. Ballard was looking down at the dead girl.

"A good-looking doll, all right. A yummy figure, good clothes, a nice place to live and yet" — He gestured emptily. "Probably neurotic . . . You going to do a p.m.? When?"

Standish had been thinking about this very thing and the result was discouraging. For he also thought of Louise Allison enjoying the third act of *Bright Harvest* — with Barry Corwin — and he found the mental picture distasteful. He looked up at Ballard, scowling, and the door opened and the white-coated men from the morgue came in.

Paul Standish supervised the re-

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moval of the body, seeing then the two small red spots on the sheet and, up at the head of the bed, the larger smear. Cataloguing the first two as polish from newly painted nails and the other as lipstick, his mind moved on to other things.

If he left now it would be a cinch to break up the Louise-Barry combination at the *Blue Parrot*. Here, apparently, was a cut and dried suicide with ninety-five percent of the evidence supporting such a conclusion. All he had to do was sign a certificate as to the cause of death and he was about to say so when something he could not explain stopped him and discontent settled heavily upon him.

There was just one little thing that did not satisfy him and only by a post mortem could he be sure. And then he remembered old Doc Lathrop who was recuperating in Vermont; he recalled the promise he had given, the trust the old man had always placed in him. There was, he knew, an obligation here, not only to Lathrop but to the job and his own self-respect. Maybe with luck, he could still make the *Blue Parrot* before closing time.

"Yeah," he said, "I'll do a p.m." And he looked ahead to the full day scheduled for tomorrow and said, "I'll do it tonight."

As it turned out, his optimism was unjustified. It was five after two when he drove past the *Blue Parrot* to find it dark, and not until he was in bed could he accept philosophically his personal disappointment over his interrupted date and be truly thankful that he had made the right decision. For the autopsy he had performed with the help of a young interne from City Hospital, had shown conclusively that Brenda Delmar had not died a suicide; she had been murdered.

When Doctor Standish entered his office from the private entrance the next morning, Mary Hayward, his newly acquired nurse, was dusting his desk. A slender, neatly made girl with fair skin, hazel eyes and the sweetness of youth in the corners of her mouth, she gave him a bright, "Good morning."

"Hi, Mary," he said, and as he came round his desk she pointed to the top letter of the little pile she had placed there.

"There's one from Grandad," she said. Then, her smile upturned, "I got one too . . . Also" — she bobbed her head towards the reception room door — "Lieutenant Ballard is here."

"Ballard," Standish said, frowning, remembering now the things that had happened last night. "Let him wait."

He tossed his hat into the closet, and while Mary Hayward took his coat and hung it up he sat down and picked up the letter. *F. W. Lathrop* had been written in a shaky scrawl in the upper left hand corner of the envelope; under that, *Cold Springs, Vermont.*

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He pried open the envelope and began to read, a slow smile softening the angles of his bony face. When he finished time slid swiftly back and there was distance in his eyes. It was 1940 again and he was just setting up his office.

It had been tough going that year. The city had not yet filled up with war workers and there were plenty of young doctors not yet needed by the Army and Navy. It was a long time between patients and the rent was overdue and the worries were piling up when Doc Lathrop, who had known and liked him as an intern, suggested that maybe Standish might like an assistant medical examiner's job on a fee basis. Six dollars a call was what the State would allow on a routine check when an examiner's man was necessary; twenty for a post mortem.

"It'll give you an opportunity for research," Lathrop said.

"It'll pay my rent," Standish said.

"You'll get a chance to know anatomy you couldn't get any other way," Lathrop added. "Without dissecting rooms a man can't know anatomy. The trouble is in college you really never get enough. You figure you want to be a really competent diagnostician some day? Then, maybe this'd be something you'd like."

Standish had nearly a year with Doc Lathrop before he put on a uniform and went away to save the lives of fighting men and make the wounded sound again. He saw the Aleutians and Kwajalein and after that he saw six months in a hospital — from a mortar shell that came too close. When, finally, they sent him home he found Doc Lathrop still at it and the retirement he had worked for all his life relegated to some distant Utopia of the future.

"Can't quit now," he said. "Nobody around but a few old crocks like me and a couple of 4-F's. Hurry up and get your office going, son, and take the strain off the rest of us."

Standish didn't believe it was that bad.

"You think so," Doc Lathrop said. "Wait'll you see these people pile in with belly aches and measles and sprained backs and busted arms and mashed fingers. You'll find out."

Doc Lathrop was right, as Standish quickly learned. But there were compensations for the pressure of work. He began to have a bank account and he met Louise Allison and presently the future looked very bright indeed. There was only one cloud on his personal horizon and that was Miss Vance, his nurse. Miss Vance wanted to get into the Army Nurse Corps and when the months went by and no replacement was found her complaints became more and more insistent.

It had been that way until one night three weeks previous, a night much like last night. They were having dinner, he and Louise, at a corner table at the *Parkside* when

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Lieutenant Ballard appeared, hat in hand, to stand in front of them.

"Miss Vance, from your office, told me where you were," Ballard said. "A guy's been shot — up on River Street."

Standish looked at him, not understanding.

"Doc Lathrop said I should get you," Ballard said. "The guy's dead and we can't move him until the Doc or one of his boys says so."

Louise Allison looked wide-eyed at Standish. "But why, Paul?" she said. "I mean, why you?"

"I used to be Lathrop's assistant," he said. "I know the routine . . . Is something wrong with Lathrop?"

"Well — he says it's just a little upset," Ballard said. "He says he'll do the p.m. tomorrow all right but tonight he'd appreciate it if you'll help out. He says he knows he can trust your judgment."

In the end Standish had to do the autopsy too; for when he called on Lathrop the next morning he found the old man sitting in a chair while Mary Hayward, his granddaughter, hovered about, insisting that he close his office for the day and send his patients elsewhere. Lathrop, a Falstaffian figure with a fringe of white hair around his skull and an acid tongue, glowered at Standish when the young doctor concurred.

"She's crazy," Doc Lathrop growled, "and so are you."

Standish grinned and took off his coat, and the fact that he was able to bully Lathrop into submitting to a thorough examination was proof enough that the old Doc was not up to par physically. In the end Standish said:

"You're going fishing . . . And don't give me any of your lip or I'll advise the Medical Board of your condition."

Doc Lathrop argued. It was, he said, all poppycock, and who would be the medical examiner if he went away?

"I will," Standish said. "There's only one condition." He told them about Miss Vance and her desire to be relieved. "Mary," he said, winking at her, "will have to take Miss Vance's place while you're gone."

"You'll not bully her," Doc Lathrop said, but even as he spoke he saw the sudden brightness in his granddaughter's smile and knew he was whipped. . . .

Standish put the letter back into the envelope and the faraway look in his eyes faded. He smiled at Mary Hayward's trim young back and watched her busy hands dusting and straightening the office furniture and it came to him then that having her here compensated him for whatever his medical examiner duties had caused him.

"All right," he said, sighing. "Tell Ballard to come in."

Lieutenant Ballard, looking very neat in his pin-striped suit, fresh white shirt and dark blue tie, glanced approvingly at Mary Hayward.

"I didn't get your report on the Delmar woman yet," he said.

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"I haven't made it out yet," Standish said. "I thought I'd better hold it up. It's not suicide any more."

Ballard opened his mouth to speak, closed it, stared. He put his hands on the desk and leaned stiff-armed on them.

"You mean somebody gave her that cyanide?"

"Somebody gave it to her — but she didn't drink any."

"Nuts," Ballard said. "You could smell it on her. There was cyanide in that glass and —"

"Somebody poured some of that cyanide highball in her mouth," Standish said, "but by then she was dead. Of asphyxia. She was smothered to death and no cyanide was ingested."

Ballard took another second to examine Paul Standish's bony face, the steady blue eyes; then he believed it.

"That's great," he said disgustedly. "Here I've got a nice clean-cut suicide and you come along and louse it up for me. Now what am I supposed to do?"

"For one thing, I'd get the sheet from that bed." Standish mentioned the two red spots he had seen, the other smudge higher up. "She might have just finished fixing her nails," he said. "But that smudge is lipstick, I think."

"So —"

"Somebody tipped her over face down and put a pillow over the back of her head and leaned on it. But before that somebody slapped her face. Hard." He stood up and examined the slip on which Mary Hayward had listed his morning calls. "Maybe it would be a good idea to pick up Brenda Delmar's husband."

It was twelve thirty by the time Paul Standish had finished his house calls and now, nosing his car into the parking space behind police headquarters, he was not sure just why he was stopping in to see Ballard. His job, insofar as Brenda Delmar was concerned, was finished. The law said his duty was to determine the cause of death and to ascertain if anyone was culpable; yet, with this case as with others in the past, he found himself reluctant to dismiss the matter so easily. Some impulse he did not stop to analyze had brought him here and now he went directly to the second floor hall. Halfway along this he ran into Barry Corwin just coming out of Lieutenant Ballard's office.

Corwin was still a walking example of what the successful young advertising man should wear. Now, however, his grin was absent, his face was moist, and sorry replaced the ready charm he so often displayed.

"Are you the one that said Brenda was murdered?" he said. "What the hell do they mean by getting me down here, questioning me about where I was last night."

Standish looked him over calmly.

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"She worked for you, didn't she? You used to run around with her?"

Corwin's brows bunched angrily. He seemed about to speak, thought better of it, and strode hard-heeled down the hall. Standish opened Ballard's door and stepped inside.

Ballard had his feet on the desk and was staring morosely out the window. When he saw who it was he went back to his staring.

"Corwin's very unhappy," Standish said. "I think you hurt his feelings."

"Yah," Ballard fumed. "How do you like a guy getting coy with me about where he was last night — before he went to the Lyceum?"

"Did he tell you?"

"No, damn it! He had a date. He'll tell if he has to and not until. Pfuie." Ballard swung his feet down and leaned across the desk. "Not that it matters. We got the husband. A lad named Garvey. And you were right about the dame getting cuffed. By him . . . He's our boy all right."

Standish said, "Figure it for me."

"This Garvey's an infantry lieutenant," Ballard said. "He's back here for thirty days after being two years across and he wanted Brenda to come back to him. She turned him down the night before last and yesterday he did a lot of drinking and went up there last night for another try. He admits he was pretty drunk and what happened was she wouldn't play and he lost his head, socked her and then smothered her.

"That sobered him enough to make him realize what he'd done and he covered up by putting poison in a highball. He saw she wasn't marked up because he'd used a pillow and he figured it would look like a suicide. It would have gone down that way too, if it hadn't been for you."

"Where'd he get the cyanide?"

"How do I know?" Ballard shrugged the question aside. "Where does anybody get cyanide? Maybe he had it with him. Maybe he originally figured on using it himself; he was drunk enough."

Standish lit a cigarette and examined the end. Presently he shifted his gaze to Ballard. "Mind if I talk to him? Alone?"

Walter Garvey was a rangy young man with a sinewy neck and big hands that trembled slightly. To Standish's practiced eye he looked underweight and there was a nervousness about him that came not so much from the present situation as from the things he had seen in battle, the things he had done.

He sat down at Standish's invitation and the doctor began to talk. Drawing on an experience with soldiers that covered a year and a half of active service, it was not difficult for Standish to get the rest of the story, and this, too, was one he had heard before — from men in his own outfit.

Walter Garvey had had just two weeks of married life with Brenda Delmar. He had met her at a party

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and Brenda was young and two years ago she had not been doing so well as a clerk in a dress shop. Furthermore, Walter Garvey with his spotless uniform and money in his pockets, had been a persistent and charming suitor and in the end Brenda was not hard to convince. So they had their two weeks and everything was lovely — until he had gone; then, as with so many other couples, absence began to work against this marriage which had, in the beginning, no solid foundation.

Letters became fewer and more skimpy. Other men appeared on Brenda's horizon. She began to model for Harry Corwin and life became more interesting. What had once seemed a lark now loomed as bad judgment and Brenda was not one to carry on for the sake of appearances.

Garvey explained all this in a hurt soft voice, remoteness in his gaze now and his present predicament forgotten. He told how he had called on Brenda that first night and how he had gotten drunk the following day and stayed that way until he went back again to her apartment last night.

"She wouldn't go out," he said. "She wouldn't even take a drink with me. She just sat there on the bed waving her hands to dry that red paint she had just put on her nails."

The rest of the story — how he had jumped up in his exasperation and slapped her face and rushed from the room — he had already told Ballard and he would not change it now. Standish heard him out, watching the brown eyes, that stared so steadily back at him. In the end he rose and opened the door.

"There's one thing you might do," he said to Lieutenant Ballard when Walter Garvey had gone. "Send someone up to Brenda Delmar's place and have him go over everything with a vacuum cleaner."

Ballard looked over at him. "And what're we supposed to be looking for?"

"A piece of fingernail."

Ballard did not hesitate long. He eyed Standish speculatively and remembered how the doctor's laboratory work and clear thinking had helped solve other cases. Even as a young intern riding ambulances Standish had shown a certain knowledge of practical criminology and Ballard knew that his interest in crime had influenced him in taking the job as Doc Lathrop's assistant. And Ballard was not a man to overlook any bets.

"Okay," he said. "I'll let you know."

Louise Allison was waiting at the *Parkside* and for a little while, sitting opposite her at a window table, Doctor Standish forgot about Brenda Delmar and Walter Garvey and Lieutenant Ballard. It was pleasure enough to be with her, to examine closely the radiance of her skin, to watch the light glisten in her blond hair. It was not until they were

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waiting for dessert that she mentioned the murder of Brenda Delmar.

Standish frowned. "How did you know she was murdered?"

"Barry told me," she said. "He phoned to ask if we were going to the Taylors for cocktails," she added quickly, seeing his frown deepen. "He said he'd had to go to police headquarters."

"She worked for him," Standish said, nettled by what Louise had said and not knowing why. "He used to run around with her."

"Of course. But that was all over. He told me so." She hesitated and Standish didn't say anything and now some of the softness went out of her eyes. "Look, darling. How much longer are you going to keep on with this medical examiner work?"

The fine warm glow that had been inside Standish went away. He had explained why he had to take this job. He thought she understood that had he not taken it, Doc Lathrop would have hung on until he dropped. Now he saw she did not understand, that it was no good explaining any more.

"Until he comes back," he said, "or until they appoint someone else."

Louise Allison turned the ring on the third finger of her left hand absently. It was a diamond solitaire that had been his mother's. Louise glanced at it and then reached under the table for his hand. Suddenly she smiled.

"I'm sorry, darling," she said. "I didn't mean to scold but —"

"Yeah," Standish said and grinned. "I know." He glanced at his watch and said he had ro run.

"Don't forget the Taylors," Louise said. "I'll pick you up between five and five thirty."

At four-forty that afternoon, ten minutes after the last of his office patients had gone, Paul Standish parked his car near the corner occupied by the James apartments and went down the side street to a ramp that led to the basement garage. There were a half dozen cars parked in the gloomy cavern, and a tall thin Negro appeared from behind one of these and looked at him.

Standish asked him if he was on duty all day and when did he quit. The fellow told him eight o'clock.

"Any night man on?"

"No night man," the Negro said.

Standish thanked him, walked to the elevator and rode to the main floor. The sallow-faced youth who was on the switchboard the night before was on duty again. His name, he said, was Albert. He was quite familiar with everyone in the building and he remembered no strangers who had entered the place between nine and ten the night before. Only the fellow who said he was Miss Delmar's husband.

Watching the other's face, it seemed to Standish then that Albert was telling the truth; yet he was reluctant to accept it because there was one conclusion he could not

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escape. Either Walter Garvey was lying or else someone had gone up to her apartment — through the front door or through the basement garage.

"Do you know Barry Corwin?" he asked finally.

"Oh, yes, sir," Albert said and grinned. "He used to be in and out of here pretty often."

"But not last night."

Albert shook his head. He was quite positive about it.

In the basement again, Standish took out a dollar when the Negro approached him. He let the man see it and then asked if he was sure there was never anyone here at night.

"Ain't no one here regular," he said. "Old guy comes sometimes to polish cars. Works as a nightwatchman down the street and comes in here evenings to see can he make an extra couple bucks."

"Was he here last night?"

The Negro's face lit up. "Come to think of it, he was. He was doin' a waxin' job on Mrs. Waters' car when I left."

Standish passed over the dollar, a sudden excitement stirring in him. "What's his name? Know where he lives?"

"Name's Cerroni," the Negro said. "Nick Cerroni. Lives over on Fiske Street but I don't recollect the number." . . .

Fiske Street was a narrow, two-block-long afterthought of City planning in the Italian section of town, and in a corner grocery store they told Standish where Nick Cerroni lived. The top floor of number 118, they said, and presently Standish found it, a shabby wooden tenement in the middle of the block.

Once inside he found a small hall with a door on the left and stairs mounting straight ahead through a thick gloom that became darkness as he climbed. He felt his way along the second floor landing and found the last flight of stairs and started up, one hand on the rickety bannister.

The third floor hall was narrow and cramped. He could make out, vaguely, a door ahead of him which was slightly ajar, and a second door on the left which was closed. He knocked here, leaning close in order to hear any sound that might come from within. He was standing like that when it happened.

There was no tangible warning. There may have been some whisper of a sound, there may have been a faint breath of air around his ankles where none had been there before; or perhaps it was pure instinct born of urgency that brought him here and nursed by nerves already taut and sharply tuned. Whatever the reason he glanced over his shoulder and in that same instant saw the figure loom darkly towards him.

Behind it the door which had been ajar stood open and he sensed rather than saw the object swinging towards him from above. He did what he could, half-turning to meet

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the attack, knowing that he could not get away and lurching sideways as he tried to duck. He knew also, in that split instant before the blow fell, that this was the killer, that he had been to see Nick Cerroni and that even now he, Standish, might be too late. Then something hard slammed glancingly from his head and smashed against his shoulder.

Off balance now, he felt himself start to go down. He swung desperately at the man as he turned, his fist crashing solidly, missing the jaw but, with the weight of his falling body behind it, staggering the man against the wall as he himself fell.

He hit the floor on one knee and pivoted on it, trying to get away, to protect himself until he could regain his feet. He pushed up, lurching against the wall and then, sliding along it and trying to turn, he heard the pounding on the stairs.

For another second he did not understand. He peered into the darkness. The man was not there and he knew then that the killer no longer liked the odds, now that his first assault had failed. He was running down the stairs. He was already on the landing below and Standish swore softly and started after him and then, suddenly, he stopped, knowing that this was not the thing to do.

Reason told him something was terribly wrong in Cerroni's rooms, that this attack on him by one who could have remained undetected was not personal, but to stop him from entering the flat.

He tried the door and it was locked. He pounded on it and found the panel thin and dry and hit it hard with his shoulder. He lunged again and this time the lock ripped off and he was in a dim, warm room that smelled strongly of illuminating gas.

There were two windows, with shades pulled low, and he snapped them up and threw the windows wide, seeing now the man upon the floor but stepping to the hotplate which had been knocked from a table so that the rubber tube was pulled from the nipple in the wall. Then he began to work over the man on the floor, a small, thin man, quite bald and no longer young.

A sound behind him made him look up. A squat, black-browed fellow in shirt sleeves stared at him and Standish gave him orders in crisp incisive tones. He told him to phone police headquarters, to have Lieutenant Ballard call an ambulance and come at once. . . .

Standish worked automatically then, his eyes moving about the poor neat room. There were two pictures on the buffet, one of a smiling youth in a Marine's uniform, the other of a girl dressed as a Wave. Each had something of the man on the floor in his face and thinking of this, Standish's anger was a tight hard knot inside him. There was a curious weakness too, from the thought of what might have happened, so that

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it was another minute or two before he realized Cerroni was breathing regularly.

He stopped, aware that the gas smell had vanished. Thinking back he realized that even at the first it had not been too strong. He turned the man over and checked pulse and respiration and then he knew something besides gas had made Cerroni unconscious. He told Ballard about it five minutes later.

"Probably chloral hydrate," he said. "They must have had a drink here and Cerroni was handed a micky. When he passed out the killer tipped over the gas plate to make it look like an accident. We'd have found Cerroni dead of asphyxia."

Ballard had already heard the rest of the story and now he pushed back his hat and watched Standish with those keen gray eyes that were seldom still.

"You sure you didn't get a look at him?" he said.

Standish shook his head.

"But you know who it was?" Ballard said.

"Did you vacuum that room?"

"We did. We got dirt and hair and pins — but no fingernail."

"Then," said Standish, "I guess I know who did it." He glanced at the two pictures on the buffet and back at Ballard. "With a pillow over her head and somebody leaning on it, Brenda Delmar couldn't do much struggling. She tried to reach up and pull the guy off with one hand, and she tore off part of a red-painted nail, and if you didn't find it, it must have got caught in the guy's suit."

"Garvey wore a uniform," he said. "It's hard cloth. A fingernail wouldn't catch in it. Corwin had a worsted suit last night when I saw him — a smooth hard finish. . . ."

Ballard's brows climbed. "Arthur Fielding?" he said in amazement.

"Fielding wore a Shetland suit last night. You know the cloth? A soft, coarse weave that's worse than a sweater for snagging on to things."

"Well, come on," Ballard said. "Let's get up there."

"Not me," Standish said. "I'm going to the hospital and check on Nick Cerroni."

Ballard started to argue, stopped abruptly; finally he put on his crooked smile. "Okay," he said. "Sure. What am I crabbing about."

"Tell Fielding Cerroni's going to live. Get that Shetland suit. You ought to find the missing fingernail stuck in it."

When Doctor Standish drove past his office at six twenty and saw Louise Allison's car parked out front, he knew what to expect but this time he had a good excuse and he told himself that she would understand. He parked out back and entered his office by the private entrance to find Mary Hayward bent over his desk marking out bills.

"Hey," he said, "I thought you'd be gone."

Mary smiled. "I wanted to get

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these done," she said and then her eyes got apprehensive and she added, "Miss Allison is waiting for you."

"Yeah," Standish said and opened the door to his waiting room. "Hello, darling," he said and his heart leaped when he saw her rise and smile at him. "I'm pretty late, I guess."

"Yes," Louise said.

"It's that Brenda Delmar thing," he said, full of eagerness now, and wanting to tell what had happened and how it had come out.

"Yes," Louise said before he could find a place to start.

He looked at her quickly, hearing something in her voice he had not heard before. She was still smiling and even now her tone was humorous but without warmth.

"I have something for you," she said, and he looked down and she was putting his mother's ring in his hand. Then as he stared and something died inside him she came up on tiptoe and kissed him. "I love you dearly, Paul," she said lightly, "but it just wouldn't work."

He stood quite still, feeling his face stiffen, knowing finally that he had lost her. He did not know quite what he said but somehow she was at the door and saying that Barry Corwin was waiting in the car. Barry would drive her to the Taylors, she said. There was still time for a cocktail or two. Then she was gone and the office was still.

After a while he slumped down in his chair. "I lost my girl," he said.

"I — I heard it," Mary said. "You can get her back."

Standish shook his head. He said, "Not this time, Mary."

She slipped into the chair where his patients sat, hands on her knees and her hazel eyes softly troubled. She asked what had happened and he told her about Arthur Fielding and Nick Cerroni and presently, because it was all so important to him, he was talking easily and explaining how he saw the motive.

"Mrs. Fielding had the purse strings," he said. "If she tossed him out he wouldn't have a dime," he said. "And I guess he got in too deep with Brenda. I don't know yet if she was blackmailing him or whether she threatened to go to his wife, but he had to get rid of her."

"You think he went there last night to poison her and make it look like suicide?" Mary said.

Standish nodded. "He must have had murder in his heart or he wouldn't have gone up through the garage. But he did, and then his plan wouldn't work because Brenda didn't want a drink. So he lost his head, and it was still murder — but not the way he planned."

He paused, continued slowly. "At that he didn't get panicky. There were no marks on her that he had made and he still had the poison so he poured a little in her mouth and left the glass on the table. The trouble was Nick Cerroni must have seen him when he was leaving.

"Yes," Mary said.

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"So long as the death was listed as suicide, everything was all right. Murder made it different. Cerroni could talk and Fielding went there this afternoon and the old man probably didn't know it was murder yet and they had a drink and —"

"And if you hadn't come when you did," Mary said. "He'd be dead now."

Remembering how close he had come to postponing his hunch, Standish shivered unconsciously. If he had kept his date with Louise, she would still be his girl, but Cerroni . . .

He saw again the two pictures on the buffet and the poor neat room and somehow he did not feel so badly. He looked at Mary and saw the warm glow in her cheeks and the way her brown hair framed her sweet young face. He thought, *She's lovely, and she understands.*

He felt his grin come. He pushed up in his chair and all at once, though he did not know why, he felt better. "Hey," he said. "I'm hungry. How about you?"

"Yes," Mary said.

"Then let's eat." Standish rose and pulled her with him. "Get your coat," he said. "A martini and then some food, huh?"

She bobbed her head. She didn't say anything, but her eyes did and what Standish saw there was sufficient.

ALIBIS ASSORTED

A Cincinnati man, explaining to police why he stole three white-wall tires: "I found one and needed three more to match it."

A Chicago man, arrested for drunkenness: "I really didn't intend to drink the whole bottle all at once, but I lost the cork."

Washington police who caught a man working with file and pliers on the back door of a local church were told by the offender that he was merely seeking "spiritual guidance."

A man in Wellington, New Zealand, told a court that he had jumped from a theatre balcony into the lap of a woman seated below in order to practice what to do in case of an earthquake.

A patron in a Mexico City restaurant, explaining why, after eating 100 sandwiches and refusing to pay his check, he stuck around until police appeared: "I was so full I couldn't move."

A nurse of Youngstown, Ohio, who, ignoring a railroad brakeman's red lantern and driving her car around him, crashed into a train: "I didn't want to stop in that neighborhood after dark."

PAUL STEINER

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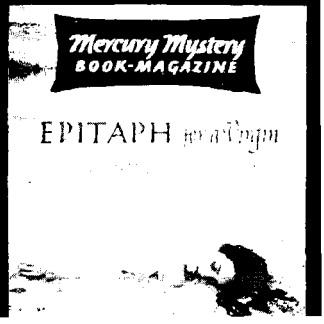
In this issue—**CATCH A KILLER by ROBERT MARTIN**

Beautiful Francine Hopkins was worth a couple of million dollars but the four men who wanted her didn't even know it. They wanted something else and one of them had a head start. Bandleader Johnny Wingate looked like the winner—he was a two-timing crumb and a heel-of-sorts but you couldn't tell Francine that; especially after they found him dead with a .38 slug in him.

Next issue *—on newsstands July 24th, will feature a full book-length original novel,* **EPITAPH FOR A VIRGIN,** *by* **ROBERT ARTHUR.** *Max London wasn't looking for trouble when he went to Dunn's gambling casino—it was just a matter of checking on some IOU's. But when he left, Dunn was flat on the floor, there were $30,000 in IOU's on the table, and Dunn's girl was standing there with a look in her eye and nothing on from the waist up. Max had no time for her just then. He had stumbled on something that couldn't wait, something that made even the $30,000 small-change. But before he*



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